

**Submission to the House of Commons
Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration:**

**Recognition of the
International Experience and Credentials of Immigrants**

**Background Information on the
Recognition of International Credentials
in Medical Laboratory Science**

presented by

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About the CSMLS

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) is the national certifying body for medical laboratory technologists and medical laboratory assistants. It is also a voluntary not-for-profit professional society that represents 14,000 medical laboratory professionals that work in Canada and around the world.

Medical laboratory technologists conduct sophisticated medical tests on blood, body fluids and tissue in hospitals, public and private laboratories, and in research facilities. Test results are used by physicians to evaluate and make informed decisions about their patients' health and possible treatment, and to help further advances in medical research. *Medical laboratory assistants* perform routine tasks that do not require independent judgement. In some provinces, they may also perform blood collection (phlebotomy) as a delegated act. Approximately 85 per cent of physicians' decisions are based on medical laboratory test results.

It is estimated that there are approximately 20,500⁽¹⁾ MLTs and 22,800⁽²⁾ MLAs working in Canada.

Regulatory Environment

Medical laboratory technologists are a regulated health profession in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Manitoba has passed legislation to establish a regulatory college. British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and the Territories are unregulated at this time. Employers in the unregulated provinces usually require CSMLS certification as a condition of employment for MLTs.

A Mutual Recognition Agreement under the Agreement on Internal Trade signed by all of the regulatory bodies, with the exception of Quebec, has established CSMLS Certification as the entry level requirement for medical laboratory technologists in the three MLT disciplines (General, Diagnostic Cytology and Clinical Genetics). The unregulated provinces are also signatories to the MRA.

Medical laboratory assistants are not a regulated health profession in any province or territory at the current time.

CSMLS Certification

CSMLS administers certification examinations in four disciplines: General Medical Laboratory Technology, Clinical Genetics, Diagnostic Cytology and Medical Laboratory Assistants. The certification process is conducted under the auspices of the Council on National Certification—an autonomous body comprised of representatives of provincial regulatory colleges, and where there is no regulatory body, the provincial professional society.

CSMLS Process for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

In 1999, the Council on National Certification approved a new process to determine the eligibility of internationally trained MLTs to the CSMLS certification examinations. The process, called a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has three steps:

1. An evaluation of academic credentials to ensure that they are legitimate and equivalent to Canadian academic standards, conducted by The International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES) – cost of \$200 is paid directly to ICES.
2. Proof of successful completion of a language proficiency test (TOEFEL or CANTest) plus a test of spoken language proficiency (TSE-P)
3. A thorough evaluation of the medical laboratory training program studied in their country of origin, experiential learning, professional development and work experience in medical laboratory science. This part of the PLA process is conducted by CSMLS.

Once an individual has successfully completed all three steps, he/she is deemed eligible to write the CSMLS national certification examination. Additional detail about the CSMLS process may be found in the appended document “**INFORMATION HANDBOOK FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT APPLICANTS**”, which is also available via the CSMLS web site at www.csmls.org

Impact of increasing demand for Prior Learning Assessments

The trend toward greater global labour mobility and the shortage of medical laboratory technologists in Canada has increased the demand for PLAs. For example, the number of PLA applications grew by 265 per cent between 2000 and 2001 and a further 185 per cent from 2001 to 2002.

This increase has placed tremendous stress on the limited resources of the CSMLS Certification Department. The PLA process is a very time consuming, labour-intensive endeavour. Once all of the necessary documentation has been received (our experience has been that it generally takes in excess of six months for the average applicant to complete the submission of their required documents) it takes an average of three to four hours to assess a typical file. This doesn't include the time spent in tracking documents or other administrative activities related to tracking PLA files.

Year	Discipline	Total Applications Received	Equivalent	Not Equivalent
1999	General MLT	31		
2000	General MLT	61		
2001	General MLT	162	86 *	19
	Cytology		2	0
	Clinical Genetics		0	1
2002	General MLT	300	164	23
	Cytology		5	0
	Clinical Genetics		5	1
2003	General MLT	301	114	132
	Cytology		6	2
	Clinical Genetics		0	2
2004	General MLT	280	35	218
	Cytology		0	4
	Clinical Genetics		1	9
Total	General MLT	1135	399	392
	Cytology		13	6
	Clinical Genetics		6	13

* Only aggregate data available 1999-2001

CSMLS has had to increase the staffing compliment in the Certification Department by two full-time positions and one part-time position to cope with the increased demand for PLAs. CSMLS is a *voluntary* professional society—the certification process is supported primarily by member dues. In order to avoid disadvantaging PLA applicants, CSMLS charges \$325 for a PLA assessment. This does not reflect the true cost of providing this service. **In an era of declining membership, CSMLS is no longer in a position to subsidize the cost of providing this service.**

Challenges in establishing eligibility

The last big influx of internationally trained MLTs into the Canadian workforce occurred in the 1960s. At that time, the majority emigrated from England, Scotland and other European countries where standards of education and health care were similar to those in Canada. Today, a significant proportion of those applying for credential assessment come from countries in the Middle East and the developing world where standards are significantly different. Language proficiency and varying cultural norms and practices pose additional challenges. In fact, only half of all PLA applicants are deemed eligible to write the CSMLS certification examination. Furthermore, the failure rate for internationally educated professionals who challenge the CSMLS national certification examinations is significantly higher than that of graduates of accredited Canadian training programs.

In the spring of 2004, the CSMLS Director of Certification conducted a small research study to identify factors that contribute to success on the national certification examination. **The study found that internationally educated applicants who had completed a bridging program (there are currently three programs in Canada - Ontario, British Columbia & Alberta) had a pass rate comparable to graduates of accredited Canadian training programs.** Language proficiency was also a significant determinant of success.

CSMLS uses TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to formally evaluate language proficiency of prior learning assessment (PLA) applicants whose language of instruction was NOT English or French. In October, the CNC passed a motion to raise the minimum pass mark for this test to ensure that applicants have the necessary language skills to challenge the examination. The CSMLS benchmark is now in line with other allied health professions in

Canada and the U.S. And in keeping with best practice in other health care disciplines such as nursing and medicine, the CNC approved the introduction of the TSE-P (Test of Spoken English for Professionals).

Challenges in Finding Full-Time employment

After working their way through the many hurdles of prior learning assessment, many new Canadians are finding significant challenges in finding full time employment as medical laboratory technologists. During the health reform era of the 90s employers became accustomed to diverting their employment resources into part time and casual positions which result in reduced benefits and related costs, as well as providing the employer with a significant amount of flexibility. These practices are still present in today's workplace, despite the signs of a pending HR shortage in the health professions. Our international educated professionals share a similar frustration with Canadian graduates at being able to find full time regular employment after completing their national certification exams.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Integration of internationally educated professionals into the Canadian workforce is a significant challenge for all health care professions, including medical laboratory technology.

CSMLS is committed to ensuring that their credentials are assessed fairly and efficiently while at the same time, safeguarding the integrity of the national certification process. Previous barriers to certification, such as the residency requirement to apply for the process and a requirement for six-months of Canadian clinical experience, have been identified and removed. Staffing in the certification department has been increased to improve turn-around times for PLA applications, and diversity training has been provided to all CSMLS staff to improve customer relations.

Clearly, CSMLS has done its part. More support is required from the federal government to assist the voluntary not-for-profit national associations who are providing this essential PLA process to the Canadian health care system.

Additional support is also required for development of bridging programs in key immigration centers, as this will greatly enhance the success rate of future applicants to the CSMLS process.

There is significant work also to be done in informing the international community of the realistic situation for immigrants to Canada and employment in health professions.

CSMLS is currently working with the Government of Canada in conjunction with the Human Resources and Skills Development agency to conduct an external review of the current CSMLS PLA process, and to develop resources to train additional assessors. We are committed to improving our processes and becoming a role model in the marketplace of prior learning assessment in the health professions.

Recommendations

- Provide subsidies/financial assistance to voluntary not-for-profit organizations that provide Prior Learning Assessment services on a national basis to ensure that no unfair burden is placed on these organizations.
- Provide more funding for full-time bridging programs
- Ensure that immigrants are given accurate information about regulatory requirements for health care professionals in Canada
- Ensure that immigrants are given accurate information about employment opportunities for medical laboratory professionals in the various parts of Canada
- Develop profession-specific English/French language assessment tools and courses for internationally trained health care professionals
- Develop education resources on topics such as ethics for health care practitioners and the Canadian health care system

Sources

(1) Health Personnel Trends in Canada – 1993-2002, CIHI, 2003

(2) Job Futures – NOC Code 3212 --<http://www.jobfutures.ca/noc/3212p4.shtml>