

Health Care Action Plan - Ministry of Health

In November of 2021, the Ministry of Health launched a health care action plan aimed at addressing the urgent improvements needed in our health care system. Areas of vital concern such as addressing staffing shortages, improving access to primary care providers, improving the process for referrals and scheduling of surgeries, increasing access to personal health records, and expanding access for addiction and mental health services were highlighted.

[Stabilizing Health Care](#): An Urgent Call to Action report was published by the Department of Health, acknowledges that health care in New Brunswick is in a state of crisis, and outlines nine (9) areas of action to be implemented over the next 3-5 years. In regard to lab services, item six (6) on this list is to **modernize laboratory services for standardized testing and faster results**. The report notes the **creation of a New Brunswick public health laboratory** in an effort to ensure citizens receive a more standardized and streamlined process for collection, as well as access to more timely results.

The reports states there is also the intention for New Brunswick's medical health laboratories to become part of an **integrated clinical diagnostic laboratory system** with strong transportation links between facilities. Citizens will still be able to have their laboratory samples collected close to home and results will continue to be provided in a timely manner. New Brunswickers will be able to **schedule their own appointments for sample collection** like blood work with the aim of giving citizens more control over when and where they receive their tests, promoting more timely access to services and helping to address transportation challenges. **A bilingual, integrated laboratory information system will be introduced**. This will support efforts to provide New Brunswickers with digital access to their health information, reduce repeated tests and improve collaboration throughout New Brunswick's health system.

When addressing the critical area of **human resources shortages** in the health care system, the report includes strategies for **recruitment and training**. The Government has committed to working with New Brunswick's health-care professional regulatory bodies and its post-secondary institutions on three specific goals:

- developing innovative education and clinical training models;
- shorter training programs combined with experiential learning; and
- speeding up the recognition of the foreign qualifications of health professionals trained abroad

Funding barriers will be assessed to identify opportunities to support more New Brunswick students seeking to enter into the health-care professions.

In a June 2022 progress update from the Ministry of Health, [Stabilizing health care June 2022](#), pages 41-42 outline the progress of the planned changes effecting labs, including the creation of the provincial health lab housed at the DGLDUHC, and the implementation timeline of a streamlined Provincial Lab System.

The above is intended to provide a summary of the reports and progress made on the calls to action as they have been published, based on the work conducted by the provincial task force. The NBSMLT was not part of the provincial taskforce and was not involved in discussions regarding the laboratory reorganisation strategy. The NBSMLT was informed of the restructuring plan when it became available to the public. We have since had the opportunity to engage with government regarding the area of

foreign credential recognition. We would encourage you to read the reports in their entirety through the provided links.

In June the provincial government also undertook the engagement of regulatory bodies such as the NBSMLT to gain a better understanding of our foreign qualification process and explore opportunities to shorten training programs and reduce unnecessary regulatory burden. We welcomed the opportunity to provide an overview on the Prior Learning Assessment process for internationally-educated MLTs, share the ways in which we are addressing shortages through various innovative project work at the national level, and put forward other recommendations to address the need to increase the number of certified practicing MLTs in New Brunswick.

The NBSMLT is committed to working with all stakeholders in addressing the urgent need for stabilizing healthcare in New Brunswick. We look forward to working collaboratively with government in respecting our mandate of ensuring the protection of patient safety through the regulation of medical laboratory technology services. In our next communication piece, we will highlight further areas of engagement and discussion we have had with the provincial government regarding the MLT shortages in New Brunswick, as well as project work happening at the national level aimed at streamlining the application process for internationally-educated health professionals and addressing the multiple challenges of reducing barriers for MLTs into the workforce.

Pathway to registration for internationally-educated MLT

In regard to foreign credential recognition, the NBSMLT directs internationally educated MLTs to our national association, the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS), which provides a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) to establish equivalency to Canadian standards and determine eligibility to write the national exam. The PLA is a client-centered process with principles of fairness with predication of choice throughout.

Once all required documentation has been provided to the CSMLS for review, the applicant receives technical report with 4-6 weeks, determining if they are equivalent, partially equivalent, or not at all equivalent. Learning gaps are determined and a learning plan is developed. Once a learning plan has been completed, the applicant is eligible to write the national entry to practice exam. An applicants' success rate on the exam is greatly improved with their participation in an established bridging program. Once successful on the national exam, the candidate is eligible for licensure as an MLT in New Brunswick.

The national PLA process is truly the gold standard for foreign credentialing, in that is a harmonized approach being adopted by all Canadian regulatory bodies (except Quebec). The process is open, consistent, and transparent. No matter which province the candidate is looking to apply, the process will be the same, allowing for labour mobility between provinces.

The process is robust in quality assurance measures. It involves consultation with multiple stakeholders, through individual provincial contracts as well as through the Canadian Alliance of Medical Laboratory Professional Regulators (CAMLPR). The process is subject to regular audit schedules by CAMLPR and adheres to fair audit practices, and is audited to CAPLA standards.

The NBSMLT is open to exploring innovations and streamlining options to further facilitate the credentialing process for internationally-educated MLTs and as such we are participating in pilot projects at the national level aimed at addressing these needs.

NBSMLT Engagement

In April, the NBSMLT, the Department of Health Workforce Planning, the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and labour and the Department of Social Development began stakeholder discussions regarding the calls to action as outlined in the Stabilizing Health Care report. We welcomed the opportunity to provide statistics for the MLT workforce in New Brunswick, share recommendations for addressing the issue of current and impending MLT shortages, and provide a comprehensive overview of our credentialing process for internationally-educated MLTs. We were able to share the ways in which we are addressing shortages through our consultation on various innovative project work at the national level.

Early discussion with government focused on their identified need for regulatory bodies to work closely with education and training institutions to reduce the time it takes to develop health care professionals while maintaining a high standard of practice. Of particular concern was the area of foreign credential recognition. The NBSMLT has identified the issue of foreign credential recognition as **one** of the important tools that may be better leveraged within the larger need to address the attrition rates of skilled medical laboratory technologists within the province. Of our 670 registrants, 24% are over the age of 55. The need for recruitment and retention is paramount.

NBSMLT Recommendations

Although Foreign Qualification Recognition is one component in addressing the MLT shortage, there are several challenges that need to be addressed at the domestic level. The NBSMLT has shared the following areas for consideration by government when looking to address the critical need of MLTs in the provincial health care system.

- **Program attrition rates.** Educational programs in the province are continuing to experience increasing attrition rates, which may be due in part to current intake policies and program admission requirements. We encourage the Department of Post Secondary Education Training and Labour to work with publicly-funded MLT education programs to either **revise admission requirements or fund additional seats**, allowing programs to meet the needs of the labour market and increase the number of successful program graduates.
- **Lack of clinical placements.** An increase in clinical placements would provide education programs the opportunity to scale up, with the potential to offer more seats to international students. Increased clinical simulation at the program level would be beneficial in reducing the time required for each clinical placement. Funding is needed to increase clinical placements.
- **Lack of Bridging programs.** Leverage well-established bridging programs to assist internationally-educated MLTs address gaps in their Canadian equivalency. **Funding is needed to assist international candidates and invest in bridging programs.**
- **MLA regulation.** The certification and utilization of medical laboratory assistants to their full scope of practice would also aid in increasing the number of skilled medical professionals who contribute to the health care team. **Funding is needed to support the regulation of MLAs.**

- **Rural Recruitment Strategies.** Consideration should also be given to creating an incentive-based rural recruitment strategy to fully service our rural communities.

In regard to these challenges, we respectfully suggested the following potential opportunities for GNB/PETL to contribute in addressing the MLT shortage in New Brunswick:

- **Provide funding for dedicated clinical preceptor positions.** Creating dedicated paid positions for clinical preceptors to provide focused training for those in clinical placements, would create more meaningful training opportunities with the potential to increase the students' success rate on the national certification exam. Clinical preceptors could be from within the lab or from the educational programs. A dedicated clinical preceptor position would reduce placement fatigue in MLTs who are trying to simultaneously teach, work and supervise. In Quebec, funding is provided for dedicated clinical preceptor positions.
- **Revise MLT program admission policies and increase funding for additional program seats.** Work with publicly-funded MLT programs to change intake models from 'first-qualified, first-served' to a competitive entry process that considers a combination of factors including grade benchmarks for chemistry and biology, interviews, Casper assessment, etc., to accept the students who have the best foundation for successful outcomes. Nearly all other provinces with a publicly-funded MLT program have moved to a competitive intake process to increase the number of successful program graduates. Alternatively, funding double the current intake numbers, to ensure sufficient successful candidates. However, if program intake numbers were to increase, the issue of available clinical placements would need to be addressed.
- **Provide loan forgiveness for MLT and MLA students.**
- **Provide funding for Internationally Educated MLT PLA candidates.** Provide funding for part or all of expenses incurred to complete the PLA process, which may include a bridging program. Lack of funding and lack of bridging programs to complete the PLA process is a significant barrier for IEMLTs looking to be certified in New Brunswick.
- **Provide funding and reduce legislative barriers for MLA regulation,** allowing for full utilization of their scope in contributing to lab work.
- **Provide funding for incentivised rural recruitment strategies**

The primary mandate of the NBSMLT is the protection of patient safety through the regulation of the medical laboratory technology profession, ensuring certified MLTs have acquired the education, skills and knowledge to perform duties in a competent and safe manner, while adhering to high standards in patient care.

NBSMLT Project Participation

Regarding the specific call to action for regulators to work with stakeholders to reduce the time it takes to develop health care professionals while maintaining a high standard of practice, the NBSMLT is proactively looking to address and reduce barriers that prevent applicants in achieving the defined standards required to obtain a practicing license. The MLT program is a highly comprehensive program that has been compacted into a 28-month college program with a clinical placement that varies between 11-15 weeks. The lack of clinical placements available to educational programs has been identified as a significant barrier in addressing the need to increase the number of new MLT professionals entering the workforce. The NBSMLT consults and participates on various projects and initiatives aimed at improved integration of internationally-educated MLTs into the Canadian workforce, streamlining education programs and reducing the time needed for clinical placements.

The NSBMLT is involved with projects such as:

- **CSMLS Workforce Integrated Learning project**, which is a federally-funded pilot program to address barriers experienced by IEMLTs by increasing access to clinical placements and fulfilling employment for Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists. The program aims to create learning and employment opportunities by pairing employers with internationally-educated MLTs who either have minor gaps in their Prior Learning Assessment or are currently un/under employed. This assists PLA clients in meeting their certification requirements through a structured clinical placement designed to match candidates with learning gaps to employers who need to fill positions, with a focus on employee retention. Partial funding is provided to both the learner and the clinical preceptor to reduce financial barriers. **Opportunity for New Brunswick:** Regional Health Authorities could sign on to participate in future iterations of the project. GNB/PETL could provide additional funding for IEMLT clinical placements. A similar model of **paid clinical preceptors** could be implemented for domestic clinical placements as well.
- **CAMLPR Gateway Canada** pilot project is aimed at streamlining the application process for IEMLTs through the development of an application portal to facilitate and support IEMLT navigation of the Canadian regulatory network. Providing clinical skills and language proficiency assessments to expedite registration.
- **CAMLPR Accreditation working group** is exploring the possibility of supporting a framework for the application of Canadian accreditation standards and oversight to international MLT programs, with the potential to allow for expedited entry in the Canadian workforce.
- **CSMLS “Creation of MLT General Boundaries of Simulation tool”** project. The project goal is to address the barrier of lack of clinical placements by creating a simulation guideline for MLTs which aims to increase the competencies that can be taught through simulation at the program level, resulting in a reduction in the total number of clinical placement hours required. The project also considers new models that accommodate a greater number of students in the clinical block, buddy systems, etc., and as such would expedite workforce entry.
- **CSMLS “Capacity Building Strategy for Medical Laboratory Science”** project with initiatives designed to meet labour market needs and address issues of retention. Components include: Creation of a guidance document on Medical Laboratory Assistant/Technician to General

Medical Laboratory Technologist Laddering for educational programs, providing subsidies to employers to administer clinical placements for internationally educated MLTs seeking licensure in Canada, and feasibility study investigating the use of low-volume disciplines-specific certification exams for applicants who may not have training in all five disciplines of medical laboratory science.

- CSMLS development of “**Specific Core Competencies**” that establish the commonly required core competencies for medical lab professionals and develop a generalized structured curriculum that would allow for education programs to scale up, teaching the foundational knowledge to larger classes and then moving on to specific competencies.

Innovative Projects

The NBSMLT, through our collaboration with the CSMLS, was able to provide the provincial government with projects being adopted by other provinces when addressing the need to better support internationally educated MLTs in their pursuit of integration into the Canadian workforce. Such notable projects and best practices include:

- In Nova Scotia the government has announced funding for IEMLTs to complete a bridging program through Michener. Similarly, in Ontario the government has recently announced funding for IEMLTs to complete a bridging program through Anderson College. These plans include in-house clinical placements with a retention strategy. The pre-requisite for any IEMLT to apply for either of these programs is an active CSMLS PLA with an assigned learning plan or one that indicates they are eligible for the CSMLS MLT exam.
- Buying into well-established MLT education programs and bridging programs, as opposed to trying to build programs which often have low outputs.
- All other regulated provinces (with the exception of Quebec) use the CSMLS PLA process as a means for foreign qualification credentialling, which has met the requirements of respective fairness commissioners (MB, NS, and ON)
- In Quebec funding is provided for dedicated clinical preceptor positions