



NEWFOUNDLAND
AND LABRADOR

**HEALTH
BOARDS
ASSOCIATION**

**Discussion Paper and
Recommendations on Laboratory
and X-Ray Technologists in
Newfoundland and Labrador**

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Background

1.1 Introduction

Amongst the many pressing issues in health human resources, the approaching shortage of Diagnostic Imaging and Medical Laboratory Technologists and Combined Lab and X-Ray Technologists requires immediate action and difficult decisions for the province.

1.2 Background

The Newfoundland work force is aging and, over the next ten years, retirements in this area will increase sharply. In Canada as a whole, 25% of the current workforce will be aged 55 or over by the year 2006. A national survey conducted on Lab and X-Ray Technologists and Technicians by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Health Human Resources revealed that:

- there is already a supply shortage,
- the casualization of the workforce is making recruitment very difficult,
- the aging Canadian population will increase demand for services
- to make the most effective use of personnel, more employers are seeking multi-skilled technologists; and
- the increasing complexity of technology, the acuity of patients and changes in the health care environment require technologists to have a broader knowledge base upon entry into the field.

In this province, to address the need for a multi-skilled workforce identified as a national issue, the College of the North Atlantic (CONA), in partnership with the Department of Health and Community Services and the Health Boards, offered and supported a combined program developed by the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, to train Lab RTs in medical radiography and Medical Radiography RTs in Laboratory. The *Radiation Health and Safety Act*, the regulations for which define the qualifications for operators of radiation equipment, is administered by the Department of Labour, which

was not originally consulted over the combined program. This program is accepted in most provinces and the graduates are particularly suited to meet the needs in rural areas with scattered populations.

To address the skills and knowledge needed for the increasingly complexity of technology, the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists (CAMRT) have adopted a requirement to have a degree as the entry level to practise as a Medical Radiation Technologist from 2005 onwards. A Bachelor of Technology proposal was submitted by CONA and Memorial University to CAMRT, and has been accepted as fulfilling all of the necessary criteria for registration with CAMRT.

On the Laboratory side, the Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Technologists (CSMLT) has taken a different approach. They are comfortable with retaining the diploma program for technologists as well as introducing a degree program towards eventual recognition as a self-regulating profession. They are confident in their ability to set appropriate standards, and in their members' resolve to follow the standards according to their skill sets, as do other health professionals.

2 Issues affecting Newfoundland and Labrador

There will be negative effects on the recruitment and retention of these health professionals if these linked issues are not planned carefully and appropriate action taken.

2.1 CAMRT's requirement for a degree

Section 10(3) of the *Radiation Health and Safety Regulations* states that a technologist must be "registered as a radiological technician by the CAMRT." In 2005 a degree will be required by CAMRT for registration. This could mean that X-Ray technologists/technicians who graduate from a diploma program will no longer be able to start practising in this province after 2004. In this province the provincial branch of CAMRT does not support retaining the diploma option.

However, s. 10(5) of the *Radiation Health and Safety Regulations* provides that:

A person who has completed a course of instruction in radiation technology approved by the minister and is authorized by the director may, in circumstances or places where the services of a person authorized by subsection (3) to use radiation equipment cannot reasonably be made available, operate radiation equipment for the irradiation of human subjects.

This provides for a process which would allow diploma graduates from approved programs to work in areas where CAMRT registered technologists are not available or required. There seems, however, to be obstacles to this approval process, which is unfortunate, since it's a potential solution for the difficult situation that rural Health Boards could face without appropriate preparation.

Canada: Other provinces have retained their diploma programs for X-Ray technologists and do not require registration with CAMRT as a condition for practice, so will have two options for potential recruitment of the necessary employees.

Newfoundland and Labrador:

Mandatory registration that requires graduation from a degree program will negatively affect the province's health system:

Advantages:

- The degree requirement will mean that professional staff will be able to meet the needs of the increasingly complex technology used in larger or more urban institutions and
- Graduates will be qualified to work in other parts of Canada that require CAMRT registration.

Disadvantages:

- Recruitment of X-Ray Technologists for rural areas will become even more difficult, unfortunately at a time when increasing numbers of current employees will be reaching retirement age.
- Graduating students in 2006 will have taken a longer time for their training, will have greatly increased student debt loads, will be able to work anywhere in Canada and

will require more money and better working conditions to attract them to stay in the province.

- The higher level of training will give skills and expectations that are not appropriate for all health workplaces in the province, so that staff may be overtrained and find the available work unsatisfying.

Note: The last diploma candidates will graduate in 2004 and the first degree graduates will graduate in 2006. If approval is not given for a class of diploma candidates to start in September, 2001, there will be no graduates from either program in 2005. CONA needs a decision from the government in order to plan to fill this gap.

For this province's needs, both diploma and degree graduates will be needed.

2.2 The Combined Lab and X-Ray Technologists

This program was designed to provide technologists with the variety of skills needed for small or rural health workplaces and meets the needs of rural Health Boards for multi-skilled health professionals. Graduates of this program are not eligible and will not in the future be eligible for registration by CAMRT. Application of the requirement for CAMRT registration, without approval of other programs as provided for in Section 10 (5) of the *Regulations*, therefore presents an obstacle to creative solutions for the shortage of technologists for rural Health Boards.

Canada: Combined Lab and X-Ray Technologists are employed in Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and P.E.I. Graduates from the program in our province who were unable to find work in this province due to restrictions on practice have found employment elsewhere or are being employed to do only laboratory work.

Newfoundland and Labrador: The graduates of the program have been rated positively by employers in our province. However, the fact that the Department of Labour (formerly the Department of Environment and Labour) is responsible for regulating the

X-Ray technologists has meant that the importance of making arrangements to meet rural human resources needs for these significant health professionals has not been recognized as it would be if the Department of Health and Community Services had this responsibility.

Quality Concerns:

- The Minister of Labour has been guided by an Advisory Committee. Some of its members have stated that Combined Lab/X-Ray Technologists are producing sub-standard work.
- The Committee was unable to substantiate these statements
- Extensive investigation by the Newfoundland and Labrador Health Boards Association has produced no evidence of sub-standard practice by graduates of the Combined program
- Medical specialists in rural parts of the province state that they are completely satisfied with the quality of the work from the Combined Lab/X-Ray Technologists.
- This satisfaction is consistent with experience in other Canadian provinces.

The previous Minister of Environment and Labour agreed to allow combined Lab/X-Ray Technologists to work in the province without certification by CAMRT under certain conditions:

- ♦ only in designated rural hospitals
- ♦ only if they undertake an additional four years of training to qualify them to meet CAMRT registration requirements
- ♦ filling positions held previously only by registered technologists in radiography
- ♦ limits on radiographic procedures

Advantages of the Combined Lab/X-Ray Technologists

- Multi-skills training for best use of human resources in rural areas
- Cost-effective: it takes two qualified technologists, one in X-Ray and one in Laboratory to replace one combined technologist.

- 16 Combined Technologists will be eligible for retirement in the near future. It will be impossible to fill these positions if:
 - a) there is no replacement program for combined technologists and
 - b) the degree program required for registration with CAMRT is the only program currently approved according to the regulations governing this area.

3 Recommendations

3.1 Regulatory Amendments

Appropriate amendments should be made to the Radiation Health and Safety Regulations if needed to ensure that both technologists registered with CAMRT and technologists who have graduated from diploma programs will be able to work in Newfoundland and Labrador.

3.2 Regulation of Lab and X-Ray Technologists/Technicians

Regulation of X-Ray Technologists should be placed under the authority of the Department of Health and Community Services, since all of the categories mentioned in s.10 of the *Regulations* are part of the health system.

3.3 CONA

Government should immediately approve the continuation of the diploma programs to

- **ensure a graduating class in 2005, and**
- **establish the Combined Technologists program as a continuing option**

4 Conclusion

Discussions have been continuing for months at the Advisory Committee level without resolution of the issues that are certain to produce a health crisis in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Based on experiences in our own and other provinces, the solutions are clear. Preserving the diploma while introducing the degree option gives choices to

potential employees in this area which will maximize the trained employees available for the different needs in the province. Allowing only degree trained technologists to work in the province will lead to a shortage of appropriately trained employees and increased costs.

Government action is required in order to ensure a viable health system in rural areas of the province. The recent wildcat strike by the Lab and X-Ray employees in some Health Boards has given convincing evidence of the importance of proactive timely decisions to ensure continuation of these essential health services in every part of the province.