College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario

Position Paper

Regulation of Medical Laboratory Assistants & Technicians (MLA/Ts)

Prepared: 2010, updated September 2026

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A. Position Statement

Medical laboratory assistants and technicians (MLA/Ts) have a significant impact on quality patient care, and that impact is increasing. Regulating medical laboratory assistants and technicians under the same legislative framework as Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLTs) would support greater consistency, accountability, and public protection across the profession. The key benefits of this regulatory approach are discussed throughout this position paper.

Discussions with CMLTO Registrants, MLT employers, members of the Ontario public, MLA/Ts, and MLTs), along with additional data collected by the College have clarified and confirmed several key reasons for pursuing the regulation of MLA/Ts. Each pertains to better serving the public interest.

These reasons are:

- The growing impact that MLA/Ts have on patient care

  In many cases, MLA/Ts are the primary source of contact between the laboratory, patients, and other health care professionals through the provision of phlebotomy services and many of the pre-analytical functions within the laboratory.

- The expansion of MLA/Ts' roles in clinical laboratory practice –

  MLA/Ts are increasingly the principal interface between medical laboratory systems and the public in specimen collection centres, point of care settings, long-term care facilities, and in patients' private places of residence.

  As a result, tasks are often downloaded from MLTs to MLA/Ts to maximize efficiencies, leading to an expanded role and broadened responsibilities within the laboratory. This trend has been increasing over time.

- The need for standardized and transparent educational preparation, consistent licensing requirements, and competency standards –

  MLA/Ts have diverse educational and preparatory backgrounds as they come into the clinical laboratory, which can lead to various challenges. Additionally, having consistent licensing requirements, standardized qualifications, clearly defined scopes of practice, and competency standards as regulated healthcare professionals are necessary for providing safe and effective services.

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- The impact of changes in the health care system on MLTs' professional practice –

  The CMLTO believes the regulation of MLA/Ts is critically important to support effective human resource analysis and planning in the sector.

B. Background

The College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (CMLTO) is the regulatory body for the province's Medical Laboratory Technologist (MLTs). In 1993, MLTs like nurses, doctors, dentists, physiotherapists and 19 other health care professions, became regulated under Ontario's *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*. Regulatory Colleges, such as the CMLTO, exist to serve and protect the public interest and ensure the highest standards of health care through regulation of these professions.

The CMLTO views the non-regulation of MLA/Ts as an anomaly that is not consistent with the goal of public protection. **Through discussions with members of the Ontario public, MLTs, MLT employers, and MLA/Ts over several years, the College has heard that this issue has grown in importance.** The CMLTO has engaged key partners in the government, the profession, the clinical laboratory sector, and other professions in the health care environment to seek ways to ensure the protection of the public interest by regulating MLA/Ts.

Throughout the last 20 years, the College has continued to engage with the Ontario Ministry of Health on this issue, providing updates on the evolving laboratory workforce and sharing recommendations regarding appropriate regulatory oversight. The College has also worked with key partners to raise awareness of the public protection, quality assurance, and workforce considerations associated with the regulation of laboratory personnel. The CMLTO remains committed to advancing discussions that support patient safety and effective oversight within Ontario's laboratory system. More than 90% of Ontarians and MLT employers surveyed through various consultation and engagement initiatives in recent years have expressed support for the regulation of these professionals.

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Overall, MLTs, MLA/Ts, and other key partners are very supportive of this regulatory initiative. Based largely on feedback from all groups, the CMLTO Board of Directors continues to consider the regulation of MLA/Ts a key public interest initiative, and one of its strategic priorities.

The College believes that increased access to a broader range of regulated health professionals in the clinical laboratory is in the public's best interest. A similar conclusion was reached by the Ontario public through a series of survey and focus group sessions in recent years. During these sessions, Ontarians expressed shock upon learning that MLA/Ts, who have the most hands-on contact with patients, are not regulated in the same manner as MLTs.

C. The Role of the CMLTO

The CMLTO has certain legislated requirements assigned to it under the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991*, as does every other health regulatory College. Two specific requirements of health regulatory Colleges are of particular importance to the regulation of MLA/Ts initiative; engaging key partners and promoting the ability of Registrants to respond to changes in practice environments.

The CMLTO has a legislated requirement to engage key partners to meet its obligations in relation to interprofessional collaboration. Through the College's linkage with MLT employers, we have heard about the important relationship between MLTs, MLA/Ts, as well as many persuasive reasons for undertaking the regulation of MLA/Ts.

Throughout the last fifteen years, the CMLTO has consistently heard from MLTs, MLT employers, and MLA/Ts themselves about changes in the laboratory practice environment. A recurring theme has been the growing involvement of MLA/Ts in the delivery of medical laboratory services, including expanded roles and responsibilities within laboratories and direct interaction with members of the public accessing laboratory services in Ontario.

Understanding the impact that medical laboratory test results have on patient care underscores the importance of regulating the health practitioners involved in the key phases of clinical laboratory testing through the same legislative framework that protects the public via the regulation of MLTs.

The CMLTO has a legislated requirement to promote the ability of Registrants to respond to changes in practice environments. The increased impact and participation of MLA/Ts in the clinical laboratory have clear effects on the provision of safe and effective medical laboratory services. MLTs and MLT employers have informed the College of how these changes have affected their professional practice.

Furthermore, for most referring practitioners and members of the public, laboratory testing is a "black box." Neither practitioners nor patients know, or have the option to direct, whether the individual performing their laboratory tests is regulated or unregulated. Members of the public are generally unaware of who is involved in performing their laboratory tests or of the competencies and oversight requirements associated with those roles. Public engagement initiatives undertaken by the CMLTO have consistently demonstrated that Ontarians place a significant degree of trust in the medical laboratory system, assuming that all individuals involved in laboratory testing are practising safely, effectively, and accurately. This "blind trust" is understandable given that MLTs work largely behind the scenes, with limited visibility to patients and the public. However, consultations have also revealed considerable surprise and concern when members of the public learn that MLA/Ts are not regulated under the same framework as CMLTO-regulated MLTs, given the degree of direct contact that they have with patients. The CMLTO believes there is a heightened responsibility to ensure that the public is appropriately protected through the regulation of MLA/Ts.

Feedback received by the College from MLTs and members of the Ontario public indicates the need to pursue the regulation of MLA/Ts in line with the legislated requirements of the CMLTO under the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991* and the Health Professions Procedural Code.

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D. Rationale Supporting Position Statement

Engagements with MLTs, MLA/Ts, MLT employers, and members of the Ontario public have clarified and confirmed four reasons to pursue the regulation of MLA/Ts:

1. The growing impact that MLA/Ts have in laboratory testing and on patient care

CMLTO has consulted with members of the public of Ontario, many of whom are regular users of laboratory services. In each case, over **90% of those consulted have strongly supported the regulation of these practitioners** in the same manner as MLTs. This is due to the **level of contact MLA/Ts have with patients**, **support for a formal process for addressing concerns they have about the care they receive from MLA/Ts**, and because they believe **regulation is linked with public protection**.

MLA/Ts have a direct impact on patient care as an integral part of the health care team in the clinical laboratory. In many cases, MLA/Ts are the primary source of contact between the laboratory, patients, and other health care professionals through the provision of phlebotomy services and many of the pre-analytical functions for the laboratory. Published research reports suggest a high proportion of medical errors occur during the pre-analytical phase of medical laboratory testing, where MLA/Ts predominate. The College recognizes that factors beyond the involvement of MLA/Ts in the pre-analytical phase of laboratory testing may also contribute to these concerns. However, since 2020, the College has received approximately 200 complaints related to this area, and the number of complaints is anticipated to continue increasing[1]. Of these complaints, 80% involved MLA/Ts and phlebotomists, while 38% related specifically to public concerns regarding blood collection. The majority of concerns raised involved deficiencies in technical competence, unprofessional conduct, and improper collection techniques. Members of the public who experience a misadventure because of an MLA/Ts' actions do not have recourse to

[1] Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (TWIG) – Accessed on February 4, 2025, from: Getting Results: Medical Laboratory Professionals and their Importance to Ontario's Health Care System - Toronto Workforce Innovation Group

a public complaints and disciplinary process. Without regulation, the College cannot investigate this growing number of concerns.

As mentioned above, consultations with members of the Ontario public regarding the regulation of MLA/Ts have shown that they assumed MLA/Ts were regulated health professionals, and the majority of participants have been shocked and expressed negative reactions upon learning that these professionals are not regulated in the same manner as MLTs. Specifically, participants have expressed that they maintain a level of "blind trust" that these medical laboratory professionals receive the same oversight that MLTs do, and that the same mechanisms are in place should they receive inadequate care from an MLA/T. Members of the public believed that anyone with that level of direct contact with patients should be regulated and directly associated regulation with public protection.

In late 2026, CMLTO presented the findings from its public engagement activities, as outlined above, to registered MLTs and MLA/Ts included on the CMLTO Voluntary Roster. Following consultation on these findings, the vast majority of MLTs indicated their support for the regulation of MLA/Ts.

The College believes that applying the current legislative framework to all regulated health professionals, whose practice could have a detrimental effect on patient care, is an acceptable and effective process and mechanism for public protection. The College also believes that statutory regulation helps ensure health professionals are accountable to the public they serve. Feedback received through these consultations demonstrated a clear connection between professional regulation and public protection. Participants consistently associated professional regulation with enhanced public protection and expressed an expectation that MLA/Ts be regulated under the same framework as MLTs. Given the College's public protection mandate, the CMLTO has a responsibility to consider this feedback and determine appropriate actions in the public interest.

2. Expanded roles of MLA/Ts

Through ongoing engagement with MLT employers, the CMLTO has observed significant changes in laboratory workforce composition and the roles performed MLA/Ts.

While the specific responsibilities assigned to MLA/Ts vary across practice settings, the increasing complexity and scope of their work has raised important public protection considerations. MLA/Ts play a critical role in specimen collection and other pre-analytical duties, which are foundational to the accuracy and reliability of laboratory results. The CMLTO is aware of cases where MLA/Ts are working in medical laboratories without the "direct supervision" required by the *Laboratory and Specimen Collection Centre Licensing Act, 1990*. Furthermore, there is evidence that MLA/Ts are being required to perform laboratory testing activities that extend beyond the "limited technical skill and responsibilities" contemplated by the legislation. In rural and smaller laboratory settings, where MLA/Ts may comprise a significant proportion of laboratory staff or work with limited onsite support, these concerns can be further amplified. Despite the increasing reliance on MLA/Ts and the expansion of their responsibilities, there is currently no formal mechanism to consistently assess competency requirements, monitor changes in practice, or establish province-wide professional standards and accountability measures. More on the need for established professional standards and accountability measures is included later on in this paper.

The growing role of MLA/Ts, combined with their increasing involvement in activities that directly affect patient safety and quality laboratory services, strengthens the case for regulation. While some MLT employers have cited that regulation alone will not resolve broader health human resource challenges, it would provide an important framework to ensure that expanded responsibilities are supported by consistent education, competence, and oversight. Notably, previous CMLTO survey findings demonstrated broad support for MLA/T regulation among both MLTs and MLA/Ts, with approximately 80% of respondents identifying benefits such as enhanced public safety, greater accountability, consistent quality standards, and potential pathways for future MLT licensure.

MLA/Ts are increasingly the principal interface between the medical laboratory system and the public in specimen collection centres, point of care settings, long-term care facilities, and patients'

private residences. Members of the public who experience a misadventure because of an MLA/T's actions do not have recourse to a public complaints and disciplinary process. Almost 200 non-MLT complaints were received by the CMLTO in the last 6 years, and 80% of these complaints were about MLA/Ts or phlebotomists. The CMLTO refers these complaints to the Ministry but has no information as to what action the Ministry takes in response. Regulation would put MLA/Ts on the same footing as MLTs in dealing with the public and in matters of public protection.

3. Standardized educational preparation, consistent licensing requirements and competency standards are required

Consultation findings have highlighted the importance of consistent educational preparation, clear competency expectations, and appropriate accountability mechanisms for MLA/Ts. Across multiple key partner groups, participants noted that educational pathways and training experiences for MLA/Ts can vary, which may contribute to differences in knowledge, skills, and preparedness for practice.

Through surveys and focus groups conducted in recent years, MLT employers indicated that training approaches for MLA/Ts may differ across educational and workplace settings, resulting in varying levels of readiness among new entrants to the profession. Employers also observed that the responsibilities of some MLA/T roles have evolved over time and suggested that greater consistency in education, training, and oversight could support public protection. While workplace measures such as standard operating procedures and competency assessments play an important role in promoting safe practice, some participants felt that these measures may not fully address all concerns related to variability in preparation and role expectations.

Additionally, employers noted that unregulated professionals are not subject to the same professional obligations as regulated health professionals, including expectations related to ongoing learning, continuing competence, professional development, and accountability. Employers described a heightened risk when unregistered MLA/Ts perform MLT-specific functions. While employers report that the professional practice of MLA/Ts working within laboratory settings is

monitored and competency is assessed, these mechanisms vary between workplaces and are not standardized across the province.

Findings from employer engagement demonstrated broad support for the regulation of MLA/Ts. The majority of employers supported regulation, citing public safety concerns arising from the absence of formal oversight. Employers identified regulation as a mechanism to strengthen accountability, establish consistent professional and competency standards, and enhance public protection. Participants emphasized the need for clearly defined scopes of practice, standardized educational and competency requirements, ongoing professional development expectations, and mechanisms to address complaints and concerns in a transparent and public-facing manner. Employers also underscored the importance of clear role definitions, regional workforce strategies, and innovative staffing models to address ongoing human resource challenges while maintaining safe, high-quality patient care.

Similar themes emerged through focus group discussions with members of the public, which has been discussed above. Many indicated that they assumed that all individuals providing laboratory services were subject to entry to practice standards, quality assurance processes, and transparent professional conduct processes. Overall, public participants expressed strong support for regulation, citing its potential to improve safety and risk mitigation, provide reassurance regarding training and competence, prevent harm arising from poorly trained personnel, strengthen accountability, and promote consistency and standardization across the province. The regulation of MLA/Ts would ensure that all laboratory professionals are performing safe and effective service in alignment with public expectations and assumptions.

4. Impact of changes in the health care system on MLT professional practice

Realities within the clinical laboratory have led to an increased role for MLA/Ts. To the MLT, this means a greater need for supervision of laboratory staff, as well as the lingering question of where to draw the line between appropriate work for an MLT and MLA/T. With the high variability of roles and responsibilities of MLA/Ts in the lab, along with the need for MLTs to oversee the

outcomes of MLA/Ts work, MLTs are becoming increasingly concerned about their responsibility and liability related to the professional practice of MLA/Ts.

Workforce pressures, including longstanding MLT shortages, increasing service demands, and the retirement of experienced practitioners, have led some laboratories to replace vacant MLT positions with MLA/T positions, while others have expanded their complement of MLA/Ts to support operational needs. As the number of MLA/Ts in the laboratory workforce has increased, responsibilities traditionally performed by MLTs have increasingly been delegated to MLA/Ts to improve efficiency and maintain service delivery. The CMLTO has been informed that MLA/Ts are now involved in a broader range of laboratory activities, including responsibilities extending beyond traditional pre-analytical functions and, in some settings, participation in all phases of laboratory testing. Survey findings further demonstrated that approximately half of MLA/T respondents reported performing duties beyond pre-analytical activities, with many assuming additional responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to increased workload, staffing shortages, and workforce attrition.

The Ontario Ministry of Health has clearly indicated that health human resource planning is critically important in fulfilling the Minister's duties under section 3 of the RHPA and in achieving the government's broader objectives and priorities with respect to the health care delivery system. The Health Professions Procedural Code (subsection 2.1) defines the following "Duty" for Colleges:

> *"... to work in consultation with the Minister to ensure, as a matter of public interest, that the people of Ontario have access to adequate numbers of qualified, skilled and competent regulated health professionals."*

There are particular human resource challenges in the medical laboratory sector. Health Human Resource reports compiled by the CMLTO over the past five years have identified notable demographic trends within the MLT profession. These reports consistently show higher representation among those aged 51 to 60, highlighting an aging workforce and reinforcing concerns about increasing retirements.

The CMLTO believes the regulation of MLA/Ts is critically important to support effective human resource analysis and planning in the sector. The regulation of MLA/Ts by the CMLTO would therefore assist in human resources planning as is required of the College by subsection 2.1 of the Health Professions Procedural Code.

E. Future Directions

Pursuing the regulation of MLA/Ts, as directed by the CMLTO Board of Directors, will remain the product of a multi-year process involving careful planning, consultation, and implementation activities, enabled in the short term by:

1. Continued outreach and information sharing to MLTs, MLA/Ts, MLT employers, and members of the Ontario public by the CMLTO to keep them informed and engaged regarding the regulatory initiative.
2. Continued communication with the Ministry of Health to ensure they remain informed and aware of the initiative's importance.
3. Continued maintenance of the CMLTO Voluntary Roster for Registered Medical Laboratory Technicians. Until the time that MLA/Ts are regulated health professionals in Ontario, a Voluntary Roster of Registered Medical Laboratory Technicians has been developed and is continuously maintained by the CMLTO. The Voluntary Roster will serve the public interest by confirming that MLA/Ts meet a certain level of educational and professional practice criteria.
4. Ongoing reporting of information relevant to the initiative received by the College, including anonymized survey data, complaint trends involving MLA/Ts, changes in laboratory practice, and health human resource data.

The regulation of MLA/Ts is an important priority that continues to resonate with the medical laboratory technology community, the Ontario public, and beyond. The CMLTO encourages all key

partners in the health care system to inform themselves and remain engaged. The most up-to-date information on this initiative can be found on the CMLTO website, accessible here. The CMLTO commits to sharing information and gathering feedback about the regulation of MLA/Ts in Ontario.