PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW

The Role of the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science

ABSTRACT

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) is the national certifying body for medical laboratory technologists and medical laboratory assistants. CSMLS has had a prior learning assessment and review process (PLAR) in place since 1999. This article describes how the PLAR process has evolved, and highlights new initiatives to ensure that the process keeps pace with best practices and does not pose unnecessary barriers to internationally educated medical laboratory technologists.

Seungkuk Yoo loved his job as a medical laboratory technologist at the INHA University Hospital in South Korea, where he had worked for more than 10 years. But he and his wife, who was also a medical laboratory technologist, decided Canada offered better opportunities for their two young children, and they immigrated in mid-2003. Today the Yoo family lives in Vancouver, and Mr. Yoo is working at MDS Metro, having successfully passed the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science national certification exam.

It is a story that would be familiar to many internationally educated professionals, although not all arrive in Canada and immediately begin work in their chosen profession, regardless of their years of experience. Technology, practices and protocols vary from country to country, English language skills may be rudimentary, and a person's work experience may be so specialized that it is not easily transferable. The challenge is to determine where the gaps are, and how best to fill them.

That is where prior learning assessment and review (PLAR) comes in. The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) uses the PLAR process to evaluate the credentials of internationally trained medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) to determine if they are eligible to write the national certification examinations.

In Canada (and with the exception of Quebec), MLT regulatory bodies require CSMLS certification as a condition of registration. Internationally educated MLTs who want to become certified must apply to the CSMLS for prior learning assessment. The PLAR process evaluates academic credentials, language proficiency, experiential learning and work history to determine eligibility to write the national certification examination.

CSMLS established a formal PLAR process in 1999. Since that time, the CSMLS and the Council on National Certification have worked hard to ensure that the process does not create artificial barriers for internationally educated MLTs. In 2002, the residency requirement for the PLAR process was lifted, and internationally educated MLTs can, as a result, apply for PLAR in their country of origin.

Workflow and staffing have been realigned in the Certification Department to facilitate a timely turnaround of PLAR applications. In most cases, applications are processed within four weeks of receipt (assuming all of the documents are provided). Documents required for completion of the PLAR process are easily accessible on the CSMLS web site.

In 2005, the Government of Canada, through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), provided funding for an external review of the CSMLS prior learning assessment process to ensure it conforms to best practices and does not unwittingly put up roadblocks for internationally educated MLTs. The funding also supported the development of a training manual for PLAR assessors to ensure consistency in the assessment process. The review was conducted by a consultant from the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). Feedback on the PLAR process was sought from employers, PLAR applicants, regulatory bodies, education programs and CSMLS staff, as part of the review.

A report was presented to the Council on National Certification and to the Board of Directors in 2006 (the executive summary is available at www.csmls.org, click on Certification). The report found that the PLAR process itself is sound and does not pose unnecessary restrictions or barriers. There were recommendations on ways to make the information that is provided to clients

ALISON MCLENNAN

Alison McLennan is Director, Communication with the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS).

about the PLAR process more accessible and easier to understand.

Language proficiency requirements were also an area of concern. CSMLS uses TOEF-iBT (Test of English as a Foreign Language – Internet-based Test) to formally evaluate language proficiency. The minimum score requirement is high, but is consistent with other allied health professions in Canada and the United States.

Eager to move forward on the report's recommendations, Christine Nielsen, CSMLS Director of Certification, has applied for funding to investigate language assessment tools and language proficiency requirements for internationally educated MLTs. "Medical laboratory technologists require the ability to read and comprehend technical protocols and procedures, and to communicate clearly with patients and other members of the health care team," says Ms. Nielsen. "We believe that our language proficiency requirements are appropriate given the complexities of the profession. That being said, we want to ensure that our language proficiency requirements are reasonable and do not pose unnecessary barriers for internationally educated medical laboratory technologists."

Funding is also being sought to develop an online self-assessment tool for PLAR Readiness and PLAR Clear Communications Projects.

CSMLS is currently participating in an innovative project to help orient internationally educated nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technologists and medical radiation technologists to the complexities of practicing in the Canadian health care system. Health Canada is providing $599,915 over two years for the project, which will be coordinated by the University of Toronto, Faculty of Pharmacy. Ms. Nielsen will represent CSMLS on the Internationally Educated Healthcare Professionals Orientation Working Group.

It is unlikely that the demand for PLAR will decrease in the near future. "The ageing population and the low birth rate will necessitate an aggressive campaign to attract immigrants to Canada," says Ms. Nielsen. "Medical laboratory technology is on the list of occupations that are in demand. There is pressure from federal and provincial governments, employers and regulatory bodies to speed up the process," she says. "It has been a big challenge for CSMLS to accommodate this need, since we do not receive any government funding to do it. We are, however, firmly committed to providing a PLAR process that is fair, efficient and upholds the integrity of national certification."

Medical laboratory technologists conduct laboratory tests on blood, body fluids and body tissue; they also interpret results. Test results provide critical information used by doctors to diagnose and treat illness and to maintain their patients' health. In fact, up to 85 per cent of decisions about diagnosis and treatment are based on laboratory test results. Medical laboratory technologists are graduates of accredited training programs at the college or university level. CSMLS certifies medical laboratory technologists in three disciplines: General Medical Laboratory Technology, Diagnostic Cytology and Clinical Genetics. CSMLS also certifies medical laboratory assistants.

