



Reflecting on a year of extraordinary teamwork and dedication in B.C.'s medical laboratory system

By Craig Ivany, Chief Provincial Diagnostics Officer, Provincial Health Services Authority

When I tell people I began my role as Chief Provincial Diagnostics Officer at the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) on April 1, 2020, their eyes get wide. It's true that taking leadership of the Provincial Laboratory Medicine Services (PLMS) in B.C. two weeks after the declaration of an unprecedented pandemic was one of the great challenges of my career, but I actually feel very fortunate that I stepped into my role when I did. Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to witness remarkable teamwork, dedication and creativity at every level of B.C.'s public laboratory system. It's been my honour to be part of laboratory services in B.C. during this extraordinary time.

B.C.'s PLMS is a relatively new entity; it was created in 2019 by bringing together the BC Agency for Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, the Provincial Blood Coordinating Office and Lower Mainland Laboratories. These programs were united under a single governance structure to improve coordination and create a more robust and dynamic clinical laboratory system in B.C. This has proved incredibly valuable in the past year as COVID-19 has made provincial coordination absolutely crucial to meeting the immense needs posed by this virus.

In March 2020, as it became clear COVID-19 would present an extreme and ongoing challenge to the laboratory system, PLMS established an emergency operations committee to coordinate the pandemic response for COVID-19 testing. This committee brought together representatives from all B.C. health authorities, the Ministry of Health, private sector laboratories and key corporate teams including human resources, supply chain and information management and technology services. Eventually, when the immediate crisis presented by the pandemic subsided, the emergency operations centre transitioned to the provincial laboratory standing committee for the COVID-19 response, which is ongoing.

These committees made it possible for the entire medical laboratory system in B.C. to work together towards the common goal of providing British Columbians with accessible and timely COVID-19 testing. We were able to coordinate across the province to respond to outbreaks, set up testing and assessment centres and allow people to get timely access to their test results by partnering with Health Gateway.

In late 2020, we reached our ambitious goal of increasing COVID-19 testing capacity in B.C. to 20,000 tests a day. As I'm sure BCCLS members are aware, that's a capacity of 20,000 tests above and beyond all the work the medical laboratory system already does



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on a daily basis, analysing samples for the more than 4,200 publically funded diagnostic tests available in B.C.

This huge increase in capacity was made possible through a number of other major accomplishments. These changes give us a sense of what's possible in a coordinated provincial model and some will continue to be in place after the pandemic ends. Our successes during COVID-19 include:

- Managing inventory on a provincial level, allowing key supplies to go where they are most needed
- Ensuring we have the workforce we need to meet testing demands by working with human resource teams across health authorities, Health Employees Association of BC, regulatory bodies and the Ministry of Health
- Creating a bi-directional information system that allows key testing data to travel back and forth between all non-Lower Mainland COVID-19 testing hub sites and the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), as well as between BCCDC, Fraser Health Authority, St. Paul's Hospital and LifeLabs.
- Developing daily provincial dashboards on testing volumes, turn-around times, and inventory of testing reagents and supplies. These are shared with leaders across the province and allow us to move nimbly to respond to demand and keep testing turnaround times manageable.
- In a matter of just a few weeks, turning an empty convention hall the BC Convention Centre into a fully functioning [accessioning site for COVID-19 samples](#). By increasing the speed of accessioning, this site played a key role in allowing us to expand capacity to 20,000 tests per day.

I've given you the "big picture" of how we've responded to the pandemic at PLMS, and in my role, I'm lucky to have this perspective. That said, I know that what really makes these many accomplishments possible is what happens every hour of every day at laboratory sites all over B.C. Our COVID-19 response is driven by that hard work and dedication of BCSLS members and others who demonstrated creativity, flexibility and commitment in the face of extraordinary challenges.

COVID-19 has shown us how much we can accomplish when we take a provincial approach to laboratory medicine. I know the teamwork, innovation collaboration that has served us well during this difficult time will continue after the pandemic ends and we move on to tackling other obstacles and making laboratory medicine in B.C. the best it can possibly be. This past year has been dark in many ways, but I also feel very hopeful as I think of all the people who've stepped up and done amazing work during a time of great stress and uncertainty. I'm looking forward to seeing what else we can achieve together.