

Executive Summary

UNDER PRESSURE: Report on Workload
of CUPE Medical Technologists and Technicians
in Saskatchewan



MAY 2017

CUPE HEALTH CARE
WORKERS







Medical technologists and technicians play a critical role in our health care system. Many of them work behind the scenes doing laboratory tests or preparing medications for patients. Others work directly with patients doing x-rays, CT or MRI scans or other critical diagnostic tests. Doctors rely on timely and accurate results from medical technologists and technicians so they can diagnose illnesses and establish a treatment plan for their patients.

A recent survey of medical technologists and technicians raises concerns about how increased workload is impacting the quality of services to patients and the health of technologists.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) represents 874 medical technologists and technicians in five health regions in Saskatchewan: Regina Qu'Appelle, Sun Country, Sunrise, Prince Albert Parkland and Prairie North. In November 2016, the Medical Technologists and Technicians committee of CUPE's Health Care Council conducted an online survey of medical techs to better understand how workload impacted patients and technologists.

The results from the survey indicate that increased workload and understaffing of medical techs is putting them under extreme pressure and compromising patient care. Increased workload means that medical techs cannot complete all their work on shift, which pushes them to work through scheduled breaks, come to work early or leave late. This can lead to delays in patient diagnosis, errors and staff burnout.

The heavy workload is affecting the personal and mental health of medical techs in the province. This report measures the impact that workload has had on medical techs and includes moving first-hand accounts that describe the cost to their personal health and family lives.

THE FOLLOWING POINTS SUMMARIZE THE KEY FINDINGS IN OUR REPORT.

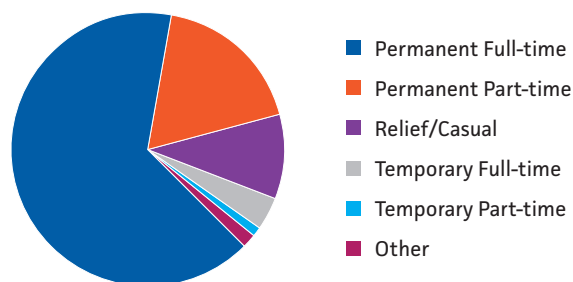
Response rate

- The response rate to the survey was 22.4%
- The classifications with the highest number of responses to the survey were: Medical Laboratory Technologists (41.0% of respondents); Combined Laboratory & X-Ray Technicians or CLXTs (24.1%); Medical Radiation Technologists (16.4%); Pharmacy Technicians (3.6%) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) Technologists (3.6%)

Background information

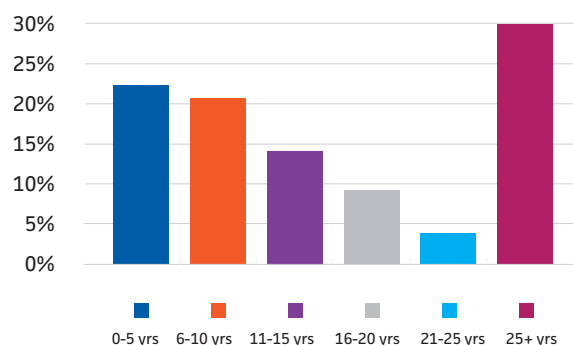
- Almost two-thirds (65.6%) of medical techs work in permanent full-time jobs, compared to 36.6% of all health care workers in CUPE. The medical techs who are least likely to work full-time are the CLXTs: 56.8% of them work in part-time, temporary or casual positions.

Employment Status



- The survey indicates a significantly new workforce with 43% of respondents having worked ten years or less in their classification; 30% of respondents say they have worked for 25 years or more and are nearing retirement.

Years working as a Technologist/Technician

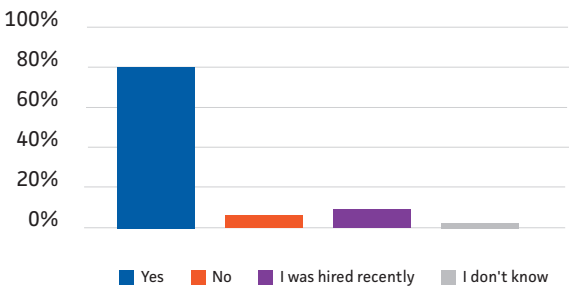


- Response to our survey indicates a very young workforce: 38.8% of respondents are younger than 35 years. There were very few respondents who were 65 years of age or older and only 16.1% were between the ages of 55 and 64.
- 92.2% of respondents were female and 7.8% identified as male. About 86% of all CUPE health care workers are women.

Workload has increased

- 81.7% of medical techs reported that their workload increased over the last five years. Only 6.3% said their workload had not increased.

Has your workload increased in the last five years?

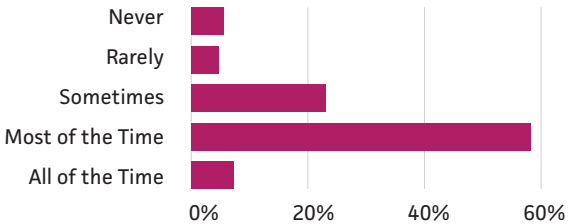


- Among the classifications, 100% of pharmacy technicians and MRI technologists, and 92.2% of medical laboratory technologists reported an increase in workload.
- “Working short and understaffing” was the most frequently mentioned factor contributing to workload: 27.5% of respondents selected this. The second most common factor was “additional job duties assigned to me.” Almost one in five (19.7%) selected this. The next three most chosen factors were: “employer not backfilling for leaves” (13%), “outdated equipment/equipment breakdown” (12.4%), and “vacant positions not being filled” (10.4%).
- Almost one-quarter of respondents said they “sometimes” complete all their work

in a shift and 10.4% said they “rarely” or “never” finish their work.

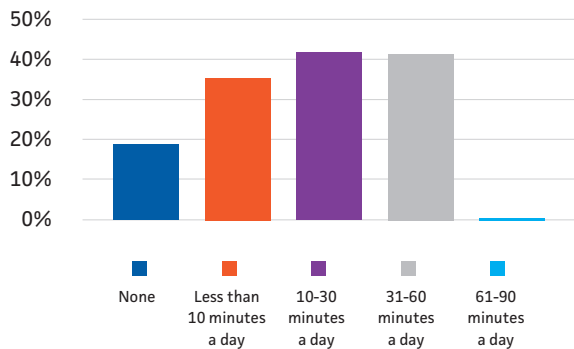
- Only 7.3% said they complete their work “all the time,” and 58.9% said they finish their work “most of the time.”
- 44.6% of medical laboratory technologists and 42.9% of MRI technologists said they “never, rarely or sometimes” complete their work during the shift.

Are you able to complete all your work in a given shift



- 24.3% of medical techs said they work through scheduled breaks or lunch “most or all of the time.” MRI technologists reported the highest rates of working through breaks: 100% said they work through breaks “all or most of the time”.
- More than one out of four (26.4%) medical techs come to work early or leave late “most or all of the time.” Only 15.6% said they “never or rarely” come to work early or leave work late to address workload.

How much unpaid work do you do in a day?

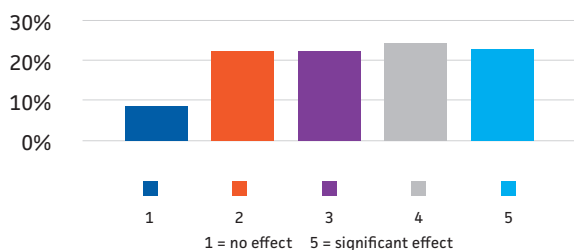


- Because of heavy workload, medical techs are working additional unpaid minutes per day that add up over a week, a month and the year. 41.5% reported that they provide 10 to 30 minutes of unpaid work on an average day. That adds up to between 50 minutes and two and a half hours per week of unpaid work.

Impact of workload on patient care

- About 47% of medical techs reported that increased workload had a significant effect on the quality of services to patients.

Impact of workload on patient care



- Almost the same number of medical techs (47.1%) felt that increased workload had a significant impact on patients' health and safety. Among the classifications, the MRI Technologists showed the highest level of concern that their workload is affecting the health and safety of patients. All of them (100%) selected 4 and 5, indicating they believe their workload is impacting patients' safety.

Some of the comments highlight the concerns of medical techs:

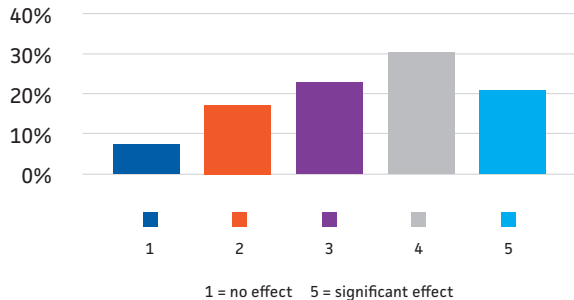
It doesn't allow for proper patient care. When you have 10 patients waiting and you need to be completed by a certain time (end of the day) or else the patients will be sent away, how is that having the proper care for each individual patient? Patients' one on one time with us is being robbed from them because we are continuously way too busy to give them our full attention that they need and deserve.

We are being asked to 'cut corners' in order to maximize the number of patients seen each day in our department, as well as to do this without incurring overtime. This is very frustrating because it affects the health and safety of our patients and our staff.

Impact of workload on the health and personal lives of medical techs

- Over one-half of medical techs (51.9%) reported that workload had a significant effect on their personal health and safety at work; 71.4% of MRI technologists and 68.9% of medical radiation technologists gave the same rating.

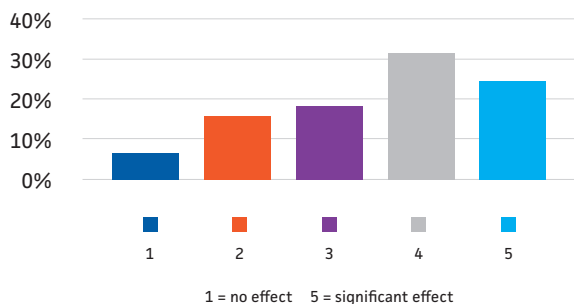
The impact workload on my health and safety at work



"I go home exhausted and in a fog because I barely have time to think about what I am doing. It takes longer to relax at home and let go of the day."

We have doubled our workload in the last year, but the department still has the same number of full-time staff. The staff is working a great deal of overtime and often keeps working through breaks. The staff in our department is getting run down and exhausted. The stress is becoming overwhelming at times.

How workload affects my personal health

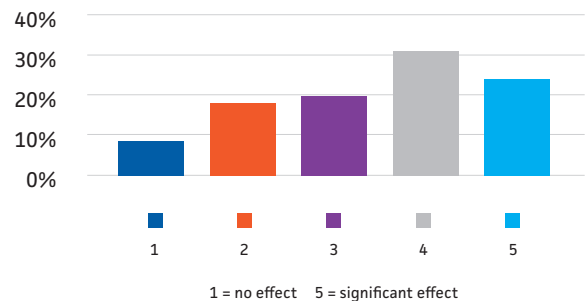


"We have had an increase in strain on our bodies. We are doing a larger volume of the same thing and it's hard on our hand, neck and back."

I've had evening shifts where I am on the brink of an emotional meltdown. I have had to calm myself down and pull it together because everyone is feeling the same way, and you simply don't have the time to go take a break and step away from your benchwork. There's no one to 'step in' for you.

"Stressful. My personal relationships have faltered! My health has been affected. I had to cut back on hours because it was killing me."

How workload affects my home/personal life



There has always been a heavy workload in my one tech lab. It has affected my ability to take time off when my children wanted me to attend school functions etc. I rarely get more than a couple of days off in a row as I have no replacement and have not had for most of the 24 years I have worked in this position.



"I have no energy left for my family at the end of the day. I have gone home with tightness in my chest. I used to love my job but now am counting the days until retirement."

Seventy-five percent of respondents took the time to elaborate on how workload has affected them and their work. Medical technologists and technicians said that they are tired, exhausted, under pressure, unable to sleep well and frustrated. They are worried about making mistakes, feel that their personal and mental health is suffering under the increased demands and say the morale in the workplace has deteriorated.

"Being understaffed, a very heavy workload and malfunctioning/not working equipment has dramatically increased my stress and anxiety to the point where it can be difficult to want to go to work."

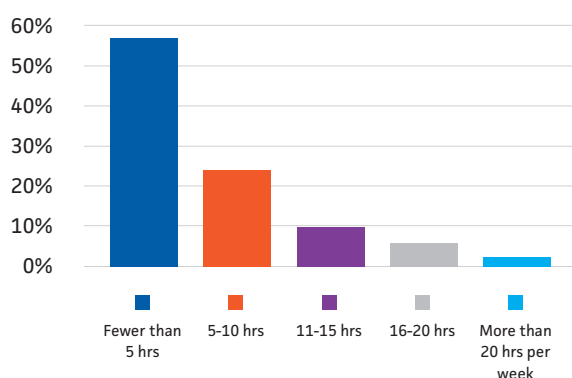
Our stress level is very high due to lack of staff, increased demands on staff, overtime, and inability to get time off because there is no staff to cover. Staff are not well rested. We are at a critical staffing level - our lab is on the point of collapse! Staff are giving up hope, after months of these circumstances, that things will improve, and are seeking jobs elsewhere, such as out of province and outside of Canada.

Call back hours

One of the key issues affecting medical techs is the frequency of call back hours. Medical technologists and technicians have scheduled hours of work, may be scheduled to work on call but they may also be called back to work after completing a full shift to deal with an emergency or unforeseen work.

Over 61% of all respondents to the survey said they get called back to work. Of those, over one-half (57.5%) said they are called back to work for five hours or less in an average week. Another 24.2% are called back to work for five to ten hours every week. Just over 18% of respondents are called back to work more than 11 hours in a week.

Call back hours on average per week



Medical techs report being tired and exhausted, unable to think straight or concentrate, and they are worried about making mistakes that put patients at risk. The exhaustion from on call work affects their physical and mental health and it interferes with their personal and family life.

"When you work a full shift and then are on call all night and then work a full shift the next day it can sometimes be difficult to give it your all without making mistakes. It can be dangerous to patient care and patient outcomes."

If you have a bad night of call and you have to work the next day, you are almost like you are impaired. You are so tired you cannot think straight; it can be a real danger to clients."

There was recently a night where I started at 715. From 345 to 515 I had to work OT. Then I was called back at 7 and was there until midnight. I FINALLY called in a new tech after trying to reach my manager with no luck. I couldn't function. I couldn't think. Things were going wrong in CT because I couldn't focus. It is jeopardizing patients!!!

What would improve workload?

Respondents were asked what kind of measures would improve their workload and working conditions. The four most common responses were:

- Replacement for vacation and sick leave (65.8%)
- Raise baseline staffing (56.1%)
- Improve scheduling (46.9%)
- Increased worker participation/input into decision making at workplace (39.3%)





CONCLUSION

The results of this survey call for immediate action to address the crushing workload and staff shortages of medical technologists and technicians in the province. The situation is critical and steps need to be taken to improve staffing levels and working conditions.

This is about patient care. Medical technologists and technicians are under pressure to provide safe, accurate, high quality and timely results to physicians and their patients. Patients' health is at risk if there is a mistake on a blood test or if a critical diagnosis is delayed because of workload or equipment failure. The provincial government must alleviate workload by increasing staffing levels of medical techs.

CUPE is concerned that increased workload, understaffing and workplace stress will cause many medical techs to leave the workplace or the province. There were many comments in our survey indicating that many medical techs are already considering this. There is also a need to create a long-term recruitment and retention plan to replace medical techs who are nearing retirement.

CUPE recommends that:

1. The Ministry of Health and each Regional Health Authority conduct a provincial audit of vacant positions and appropriate staffing needs for medical technologist and technician positions in health care. We request that you consult front-line staff during the audit process and share the results of the audit with us.
2. The Ministry of Health increase funding to Regional Health Authorities dedicated to hire additional medical technologists and technicians to address workload and staffing requirements for safe and quality patient care.
3. The Ministry of Health, working with Regional Health Authorities, revise its Health Human Resources Plan to address the existing and forecasted shortages in medical technologist and technician positions.

**For a copy of the full report, go to:
www.cupesaskhcc.ca**



caring for you

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