

Supply and Demand for Therapy Technicians

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

Prepared by:
Dr. Beverly A. MacKeen
Beverly A. MacKeen, PhD and Associates
Phone: (780) 454-8686

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Therapy Technicians

The Northern Alberta Clearinghouse Project is a partnership of northern colleges who each year identify a number of priority research topics. The partner colleges are: Fairview College, Grand Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Lakeland College and Northern Lakes College. The investigation of supply/demand issues, shortages and training needs for medical, human services and continuing care workers in northern Alberta was one such priority topic.

Methodology

There are six Regional Health Authorities (RHA) within the NADC region. They are:

Lakeland RHA #12

Mistahia RHA #13

Peace Health Authority #14

Keeweenok Lakes RHA #15

Northern Lights RHA #16

Northwestern RHA #17

Each Health Authority was contacted for information concerning current and anticipated staff shortages.

A search of Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) website, OccInfo, yielded a great many occupations in the therapy technician series. These occupations, as follows, were included in the survey of RHAs:

Cardiology Technologist
Diagnostic Medical Sonographer
Emergency Medical Technologist
Emergency Medical Responder
Laboratory Technologist
X-Ray Technologist
Personal Care Attendant
Physiotherapy Assistant
Pharmacy Technician
Psychiatric Aide
Dental Laboratory Technician
Food and Nutrition Management Technologist
Health Records Technician
Optical Technician
Prosthetic/Orthotic Technician
Dental Assistant

A number of the occupations belong to and/or are governed by professional associations. Representatives of relevant associations were contacted in order to obtain both provincial and regional information concerning current and future membership and employment outlook.

Findings

Professional Associations

Alberta Society of Medical Laboratory Technologists

Medical Laboratory Technologists are regulated under the new Health Professions Act. The Society is anticipating a very large increase in membership because, under the Act, belonging to the Society will be mandatory. Qualified laboratory technologists must have successfully completed a national certification examination.

Training is currently available at NAIT, SAIT and the University of Alberta. Student participation is subject to a quota, determined by laboratory facilities and the number of available practicum placements.

The Society spokesperson anticipates serious shortages, up to 500, of medical laboratory technologists over the next five to fifteen years. This occupation is in increasing demand along with many other health professions, as the aging population requires more care. The technologist workforce is also aging. Approximately 57% of working technologists will be eligible for retirement or will choose to work only part time sometime in the forecast period. The Society is concerned about the shortage that currently exists in rural areas and the inability of the training system to increase the number of graduates.

The impact of present and future shortages creates an additional concern: without laboratory services, emergency services cannot be provided.

Alberta Dental Assistants' Association

There are four training institutes with dental assistant programs: NAIT, SAIT, Columbia and KDH Dental College, which has facilities in Edmonton and Calgary. Each year, approximately 200 graduates become available for the labour market.

The Association has 3,800 registered members.

The Association spokesperson indicated that dental assisting is seen as an attractive occupation by those who are interested in a career in the health field. The pay is good and there is no shift work. The number of people entering the profession remains constant and appears to satisfy demand.

A pay and benefits survey is conducted every three years, the next planned for early 2002. The 1999 survey showed that dental assistant salaries are somewhat higher in northern Alberta than in other areas.

The Alberta Society of Combined Laboratory and X-Ray Technologists

The Society currently has 275 registered members and those numbers are increasing each year. NAIT is the only Alberta training facility, graduating between 20 and 30 technologists per year. Because of demand for the combined certification, NAIT is considering adding space for 6 additional students beginning in 2002.

Additional technologists have taken their training at Kelsey Institute in Saskatchewan. The spokesperson for the Society could not estimate the number of Kelsey graduates per year.

The spokesperson indicated that the Society is satisfied that supply is matching demand.

The Regional Health Authorities

Lakeland Regional Health Authority #12

The Lakeland RHA website posts regularly updated vacancies. The postings for the second week of November, 2001 were as follows: therapy assistant, combined X-ray/laboratory technician, two laboratory technicians, X-ray technician, rehabilitation therapy assistant, all health record occupations, medical transcriptionist, and home support aides.

A spokesperson for the RHA indicated that some of the vacancies, particularly in health records and home support aides, had existed since May and June of 2001. She also reported very high turnover rates for home support aides.

Mistahia Regional Health Authority #13

The Mistahia RHA reports a relatively stable workforce. The majority of the staff is located in Grande Prairie which is a large enough centre that people are willing to be permanent residents.

Vacancies in health records are a concern in the region. Similarly, home care worker vacancies and high turnover in the occupation exist on a regular basis.

Otherwise, the region experiences little difficulty in filling vacancies.

Peace Regional Health Authority #14

The Peace region is experiencing the same tightness of supply for medical laboratory technicians that exists in the entire province. The region hires both certified X-ray technologists and medical laboratory technologists as well as those who hold the combined certification.

Constant vacancies in general support positions, laundry, housekeeping and food service were reported.

Home care workers are in continual demand. There is a very large turnover in the occupation and on-the-job injury incidences are high. The aging of existing staff is a concern because of the amount of heavy lifting that is required.

Keeweenok Lakes Regional Health Authority #15

The region is experiencing shortages in a number of areas.

Supply and Demand for Therapy Technicians

Ultrasound/sonography technicians are in short supply. As in other regions, Keeweenaw Lakes RHA has difficulty recruiting health record technicians. There is a shortage of occupational therapy and physiotherapy aides. The spokesperson indicated that a multi-purpose aide who could function in both occupational therapy and physiotherapy areas would be very useful.

While the supply of emergency medical technicians is adequate, there is a shortage of paramedics in the region.

Keeping the required supply of home care workers is an ongoing concern. While there is local training available, the stability of the workforce is affected by low pay and physically difficult working conditions.

Portage College trains local community health representatives who act as assistants to community health nurses. In this occupation, there is a shortage of Aboriginals trained for the work.

Northern Lights Regional Health Authority #16

Northern Lights RHA has technician staff who are long service and consequently experiences little turnover.

There are currently no shortages of health record technicians, but when shortages do occur, they are hard to fill.

Home care is experiencing little turnover. The vacancies that occur are the result of expansion in the system.

All the sonographer positions are currently filled. However, when there is a vacancy, it is also hard to fill.

Northwestern Regional Health Authority #17

There is little to report from this region. All the technician positions are filled and there are no vacancies for home care workers. The region reported the usual shortage of nurses and doctors.

Discussion

It appears that the entire province can anticipate a serious shortage of medical laboratory technicians. This occupation is regulated under the Health Professions Act with those certified being required to successfully pass a national examination. Creating new training programs and/or expanding existing ones is expensive because of the necessary lab equipment. Another constraint is the need for practicum placements for the students.

The Dental Assistants' Association indicated that there is sufficient professional upgrading available for current certificate holders as well as for those who may wish to re-enter the profession.

Medical laboratory assistants are not regulated under the Act. There is potential that having a greater supply of assistants could alleviate some of the shortages in the field.

The north region of the province, with several exceptions, is experiencing a shortage of medical records technologists. The province-wide cutbacks of several years ago caused many in this profession to change careers. There is some speculation among employers that uncertainties about government funding may be discouraging new entrants to existing training programs.

Home care workers are an occupation that causes concern in most regions. However, none of the regions indicated that there was a supply problem. All indications are that the RHAs are well served by the training provided by local colleges. The root of the concern appears to lie in age levels of these workers and in the physical demands of the work.

A number of the regions reported long term vacancies in the rehabilitation technician field. One respondent suggested that a multi-skilled technician who was proficient in occupational therapy, recreation therapy and physiotherapy would be valued in rural regions. Such a generalist would be able to work in a number of settings. An examination of the feasibility of

this combined training should include the effect of local employee union restrictions on multi-skilling.

Pharmacy technicians were not addressed in this research. An earlier paper, *Pharmacists, April 2001*, was prepared for the Clearinghouse Project. The paper suggested that an increased availability of pharmacy technicians would assist with the current problem of a shortage of pharmacists.

While not directly addressed in this paper, it may be timely to reiterate the need for community and teacher aides specifically trained to work with children affected by fetal alcohol syndrome. (*Demand for Helping Skills for Teachers and Nurses*. Prepared for the Clearinghouse Project, January 2001).

A discussion with the Alberta College of Combined Laboratory and X-ray Technologist indicated that supply is sufficient for both current and projected demand. Interviews with the RHAs confirmed that this certification is sought in rural areas.

Further insights into the issues of employment in the health care professions will be provided by a study being conducted by the Quality of Life Working Group and undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers. The occupations addressed in the study include most of those discussed in this research. The survey will be conducted on the web between November 26 and December 21, 2001. The survey will appear on RHA/Health Board websites.

Contacts

Lakeland Regional Health Authority #12 (780) 656 – 2030

Mistahia Regional Health Authority #13 (780) 538 – 6156

Peace Health Authority #14..... (780) 618– 4594

Keeweenok Lakes Regional Health Authority #15..... (780) 523 – 6641

Northern Lights Regional Health Authority #16..... (780) 791 – 6079

Northwestern Regional Health Authority #17 (780) 926 – 4388

Marni Devlin, Health Workforce Planning Branch..... (780) 427 – 3276

Alberta Dental Assistants’ Association (780) 486 – 2526

Alberta Society of Medical Laboratory Technologists..... (780) 435 – 5452

Alberta College of Combined
Laboratory and X-ray Technologists..... (780) 989 – 0681