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## Pathologists call for national system to prevent testing errors

Bal Brach, Canwest News Service



Tyler Anderson/National Post

OTTAWA -- The Canadian Association of Pathologists is calling on the federal government to set up a national system of standards for medical testing laboratories as a way to prevent errors that could lead to faulty diagnoses.

The group unveiled a five-point action plan Wednesday as they wrapped up their annual conference in Ottawa. The move comes amid sharp public scrutiny over allegations of botched tests, inadequate professional controls and incompetence in several Canadian provinces.

"What we are proposing is the creation of an appropriately resourced national system to promote excellence in the laboratory medicine in Canada," association president Dr. Jagdish Butany said in a news release. "The plan is ready; we now look to our political leaders to step forward with the support needed to get it up and running."

No such standards are currently in place.

The organization is calling for the "creation of a national body, separate from government, to accredit all medical laboratories in Canada and ensure they meet quality and critical mass standards," according to the statement.

"We are unique in that we lack a national quality-assurance program to link laboratories, provide support and administer national standards," added Butany.

The proposal also urges mandatory certification for tests performed by medical laboratories as well as an external validation system, in which test results from one lab are verified by another independent and external lab.

The association said federal and provincial leaders must address the shortage of workers and resources that are undermining laboratory medicine.

"Canadian laboratories are not unique in facing workload, human-resource issues or problems related to quality control," said Butany. "Canada's medical laboratory system is the foundation upon which good patient care, diagnosis and treatment rests."

The group also calls for use of a national diagnostic checklist that would serve as a quality assurance system for labs.

The checklist would include test validation, staff training, competency assessment, standardization of operating procedures and equipment maintenance.

More than 300 pathologists from across Canada gathered in Ottawa to discuss ways to avoid the kind of testing failures that would lead to the misdiagnosis of disease.

Meanwhile, in St. John's, N.L., a judicial inquiry is underway to determine how almost 400 breast cancer patients received the wrong results from hormone receptor tests.

Subsequent tests conducted at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto revealed that 108 patients who did not receive appropriate treatment have since died.

Separate investigations were launched this year in Miramichi, N.B., Owen Sound, Ont., and Winnipeg to get at the root of inaccurate cancer testing.

The pathologists' association is a professional organization that represents the interests of its members; it is not a regulatory oversight or disciplinary body.

Only Ontario and British Columbia have regulatory bodies with authority over medical laboratories.

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