As the Canadian health care system undergoes major transformation across the country due to an aging population, increased treatment complexity and decreasing budgets, the effect of these changes on the career of the medical laboratory assistant (MLA) is largely unknown. Precarious employment has been increasing in the Canadian health care industry (Fleury, 2018). A Southern Ontario study shows that the general prevalence of precarious jobs has increased by 50% in the last 20 years (Lewchuk et al., 2015). The annual CSMLS Newly Certified Graduate Survey demonstrates that MLAs are experiencing high rates of precarious employment (Figure 1).

Precarious working conditions have been shown to have negative health effects: excessive emotional and mental stress affecting mental health, immunodeficiency syndromes, disruptive influences on family life and the social unit and chronic morbidity rates. It is likely that MLAs are experiencing negative effects of precarity. However, there is a lack of peer reviewed literature to determine this.

**Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker has:</th>
<th>Precarious</th>
<th>Vulnerable</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Secure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Security</td>
<td>Unstable and insecure employment</td>
<td>A little more employment security</td>
<td>More predictability</td>
<td>Job security and potential for a career path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Reliability</td>
<td>Irregular work hours making time management difficult</td>
<td>Unreliable work hours or permanence</td>
<td>More reliable hours and more permanence in their position</td>
<td>Predictable and constant hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage Predictability</td>
<td>Unpredictable wages and no other benefits</td>
<td>Lower earning and likely few, if any, benefits</td>
<td>More stable wage and may access to benefits</td>
<td>Stable wage and benefits, such as a drug plan, vision, dental and life insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and Professional Development Opportunities</td>
<td>Less access to job training</td>
<td>Less access to training and participation in the workplace</td>
<td>More access to professional development</td>
<td>Access to professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Characterization</td>
<td>Usually characterized as temporary, part-time, limited-term and contract work</td>
<td>Usually characterized as “standard employment relationship”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Purpose**

Using a mixed method design, this study was designed to examine the current precarious employment status of MLAs working in Canadian laboratories as well as determine any emotional or health-related impacts this employment status may have on the study population.

**Survey**

Survey: Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) Employment Precarity Index (EPI) combines 10 direct and indirect measures (12 questions) of employment insecurity to define precarious employment, including employment relationship, income uncertainty, scheduling uncertainty and relationship uncertainty.

The EPI groups employment situations on a continuum with precarious employment at one end of the spectrum and secure employment at the other (shown in the definition table).

Participants:
- Working or seeking work in the MLA profession within the Canadian environment (excluding students, transition graduates and permanently retired)
- May or may not be a CSMLS member
- Must be 19 years of age or older

**Preliminary Results**

Respondents: A total of 286 surveys were used in this preliminary analysis. All provinces and territories were represented, except Nunavut. Sixty-two percent of the participants were aged 22 to 44.

**Select Themes:**
- Emotional Health: There were many negative effects related to mental and emotional health. Examples: constant worrying, fear, self-doubt, anxiety, feeling replaceable, burden of unwanted responsibility, breeding hatred, and unable to move forward or plan one’s life. Emotional health was predominately highlighted as compared to physical health.
- Work-life Imbalance: A major theme expressed was the negative effects on work-life balance, with specific comments related to family or relationship stability, child care issues, inability to turn off levels of stress, and inability to plan family events or enjoy life. Specific comments were made about permanent positions greatly alleviating the stress related to job precariousness.
- Positive Job Attributes: Being in a precarious position highlighted all participants’ ability to make choices in their lives, whether it was having made the right career choice, opportunity to try the job out, ability to refuse shifts or take part-time jobs for work-life balance.

**Discussion**

MLAs are experiencing a significant amount of precarious and vulnerable employment across Canada. As demonstrated, in the preliminary survey findings, the employment trend shows a large percentage of MLAs lacking job security, having irregular and unreliable work hours, lower earnings and unpredictable wages, and little access to or no benefits. Although focus group participation was low, those that came forward predominately described the negative effects of precarious employment. These descriptions focused on the emotional and psychological impacts and less on actual or perceived physical impacts. Overall, an opportunity exists for clinical laboratory employers to examine their workplace employment strategies and the impact this has on the MLA workforce. To achieve this, employers must be sensitive to the profession’s precarity situation, recognizing that MLAs require a safe, retribution-free and confidential place to voice their opinions.