

Professional development: it's not new

Jillian Broadbent

Professional development is defined as "learning to earn or maintain professional credentials, anything from academic degrees to formal coursework, conferences and informal learning opportunities situated in practice. It has been described as intensive and collaborative, ideally incorporating an evaluative stage" (from Wikipedia)

CPD is not new in our profession, it has been an ongoing process from the day the first diagnostic laboratory tests were performed. There is always something new, something different or something innovative to be learned about or discovered in our profession. Professional development is our responsibility to ourselves, our work colleagues, our profession and most importantly, our patients.

The formalisation of CPD as we now know it came about following the passing of the HPCA Act (2003), and the NZIMLS CPD programme started running formally in 2005. However, before this, there were voluntary professional development programmes operating within our profession in New Zealand.

In 1995 the New Zealand Medical Laboratory Technologists Board (MLTB) introduced a voluntary, four-year pilot programme called the Maintenance of Professional Laboratory Standards (MOLS) programme. The aim of the programme was to ensure the involvement of technologists in ongoing educational activities that maintained professional standards. The programme introduced the concept of documentation of participation in these continuing education and professional activities.

Following the completion of the four-year trial period a project was undertaken to identify which groups of technologists were and were not participating in the MOLS programme; what educational activities they were attending; what benefits they had received from their participation and problems they had encountered; what resources and employer support they had received and the reasons why some may not have participated. The major problem with participation in the MOLS programme identified by the participants was lack of time to attend educational activities. The main benefit identified was increased clinical and technical knowledge and some participants had introduced new diagnostic tests and techniques into their laboratory as a result of their MOLS programme participation. Twenty-three percent of programme participants had increased their attendance of educational activities during this four-year period, while 42% said they had altered the way they practised as a medical laboratory technologist as a result of participation in the MOLS programme. The reasons given for non-participation included lack of information about the programme (45%), not compulsory (27%), not relevant to their current work situation (23%) and lack of employer support (6%).

In April 2000 the NZIMLS introduced their CPD programme which was available to all scientists who were members of the NZIMLS. The programme was again voluntary and rotated over a three-year cycle. Participants accumulated points which were allocated to a range of professional and related activities, in a manner similar to the MOLS programme. Periodic review of this CPD programme was to be performed by the NZIMLS and its members, but the MLTB, now the Medical Sciences Council (MSC), was to maintain an interest in the structure of the programme to ensure it continued to meet the requirements of legislation.

With the passing of the HPCA Act (2003), it became compulsory for all registered medical laboratory scientists practicing in New Zealand to be enrolled in an accredited CPD programme and to hold an Annual Practising Certificate.

The NZIMLS CPD was rewritten after consultation with the profession to conform with all the requirements of the Act. The programme was copyright protected, it was accredited by the MSC and introduced to the profession at the start of 2005. The 'new' programme was structured to complement the continuing education activities of the NZIMLS, scientific meetings of the medical laboratory science industry and other allied health professionals, and to recognise activities that contribute to professional development. The format was consistent with that used by other health professionals and was to be used as a tool for formal recognition of participation in professional activities. Satisfactory progress within the programme was to be used as evidence for the issue of an Annual Practising Certificate.

The programme ran over a three-year rolling period, was reviewed, and reaccredited every three years, and 10% of participants were audited for compliance by an independent auditor each year. All CPD activities were recorded using an on-line process and access was unique for each member. During the three-yearly reviews, some of the categories for activities were altered to fit with requests and feedback from the participants, and the audit process was fine-tuned.

In 2009, legislation introduced by the MSC required that all medical laboratory technicians were to be registered, hold an Annual Practising Certificate, and participate in CPD activities. The NZIMLS wrote a CPD programme specifically designed for medical laboratory technicians, it was accredited by the MSC and was introduced to the profession in January 2011 for those technicians who wished to enrol.

During 2019, the MSC policy on CPD was rewritten. CPD was to be divided into general and substantive activities and there was to be more emphasis on the reflective learning process. It was also to become compulsory for all registered medical laboratory technicians to be enrolled in an accredited CPD programme, and the required amount of recognised professional development for this employment group was to be increased. The NZIMLS embarked on a rewrite of the CPD programme to include both employment groups and to cover all the new CPD requirements. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 changed the way many CPD activities could be held so the use of webinars and on-line learning programmes were included in the new programme. This programme was submitted to the MSC in September 2020 and was accredited at the end of 2020.

This 'new' NZIMLS programme was introduced in January 2021 with enrolled scientists and technicians both using the same programme. CPD points for activities are now gathered over a two-year period (biennium) and the audits are to be carried out by the MSC. Each person learns in a different way, this new programme will place more emphasis on the learning process and the transition of this learning to practice, to ensure our responsibility to our patient.

Professional development is the way we expand the depth and breadth of our expertise and keep abreast of the rapidly expanding knowledge related to technology and development in our field of medical laboratory science.

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