

Improving Transfusion Practices in Manitoba

The University of Alberta and the CSMLS have been collaborating on a project called Lab Wisely to explore medical laboratory professional (MLP) involvement in initiatives to improve the utilization of health care resources. Our activities to date include a national survey and the formation of an expert panel to develop recommendations. This is the second in a Lab Wisely article series that highlights laboratory utilization projects across Canada.

In this article, we outline our conversation with three individuals from Shared Health Manitoba who participated in a recent project: Christine Peters, project manager; Hayley Johnson, communications specialist; and Darcy Heron, medical laboratory technologist (MLT) and technical director for Transfusion Medicine.

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Introduction

Shared Health is Manitoba’s provincial organization responsible for the coordination and delivery of health services. Choosing Wisely Manitoba, which originated as a partnership involving Shared Health, was the earliest provincial initiative to join the broader Choosing Wisely movement. This has created an opportunity for laboratory services in Manitoba to participate and collaborate in interdisciplinary, province-wide initiatives. The following recent example is a project related to a specific lab utilization issue in transfusion medicine.

“Just One” Campaign

The utilization of red blood cells (RBCs) for transfusion is the topic of more than one Choosing Wisely Canada recommendation. Several societies have recommendations against transfusing too much or too soon, such as those for critical care medicine, internal medicine, palliative care and others. While data analysis showed that Manitoba is among the highest per capita user of RBC transfusions, Alberta and Saskatchewan had both undertaken successful RBC utilization improvement projects. With lessons available from their neighbours, addressing RBC overuse in Manitoba appeared to be a relatively easy goal to reach. Shared Health Manitoba’s “Just One” campaign was launched in 2018 and began with clinician awareness. Informational postcards about the importance of ordering “Just One” RBC unit at a time to reduce the waste that can occur with potentially unnecessary extra units were attached to each blood unit. As it was an educational initiative, this step did not create much concrete change, but it was an important step to raise awareness of the issue. The next step of the campaign was to make changes through policy by enacting new guidelines based on hemoglobin levels in stable, non-bleeding patients.

Laboratory Staff as Gatekeepers

Transfusion medicine is a unique discipline within the laboratory. It isn’t just about testing because there is the added activity of product issuing. The new transfusion guidelines from the “Just One” campaign targeted reasonably stable patients, meaning the new criteria do not apply to requests from areas such as the emergency room or intensive care unit. For all other requests, the laboratory staff are asked to

consider hemoglobin levels before issuing an RBC unit. For levels 70 g/L or less, one RBC unit is issued right away. Between 71-80 g/L, the laboratory staff still issues the unit, but a hematopathologist may follow up with the ordering physician the next day to review the request. If the hemoglobin is 81 g/L or greater, the laboratory staff calls the ward to inform them that the RBC units will not be issued and refers them for follow-up with the hematopathologist. Throughout this phase of the campaign, the project team was very hands-on, making sure that everyone understood the new guidelines. Laboratory staff were involved in creation and pilot-testing of new product request forms. As the technical director, Darcy was right there with her front-line staff to provide opportunities to respond to questions and concerns. She believed it was important to talk with her staff about how the changes may affect them. As the project manager, Christine helped coordinate the overall training and education initiatives, due to the vast number of health care professionals involved.

A Team Effort

A common thread with large scale projects is the need for broad engagement and support, and the “Just One” campaign leaders used teamwork and communication to do so. Choosing Wisely Manitoba developed a process for getting buy-in that they use across their projects; in short, they start with the highest levels and then fan out. A core project team is formed and tasked with creating a broad interdisciplinary team that includes front-line workers. For the “Just One” campaign, the core team includes representatives from transfusion medicine diagnostics, Best Blood Manitoba, hematopathologists and operations directors. Front-line groups include ordering physicians, nurses and laboratory staff. Administrative staff also have key roles to play; for example, one essential role is that of the communications expert. All three of the Shared Health Manitoba interviewees emphasized this point. Communication is paramount at all stages, from buy-in to development, and throughout implementation and follow-up. As the communications specialist, Hayley mentioned the importance of face-to-face interactions. For all sizes of projects, she recommends getting the project goal on as many agendas as possible, as early as possible, and trying to be there in person.

Want to improve your communication skills?
Check out the Communications Primer in the
Tools and Products page at [LabWisely.ca](https://www.labwisely.ca)


All health care workers have contributions to make if they are engaged and observant about their jobs. According to the Shared Health crew, being aware of challenges that exist within the health care system and aligning these with improvement opportunities is a valued characteristic. Project manager Christine believes there are often many opportunities to get involved with an improvement team, given the constant need to respond to changes in the health care system.

Advice for MLTs and MLAs

Most MLTs and medical laboratory assistants (MLAs) have a unique perspective on how well projects are being implemented at the front line. Project members who spend more time in an office aren't privy to this type of information. Darcy recommends that "if you see something, let people know. Aim to be that team member who is willing to provide constructive feedback on new processes coming down the line." All health care workers have contributions to make if they are engaged and observant about their jobs. According to the Shared Health crew, being aware of challenges that exist within the health care system and aligning these with improvement opportunities is a valued characteristic. Christine, the project manager, believes there are often many opportunities to get involved with an improvement team, given the constant need to respond to changes in the health care system. The desired type of team member for the job is collaborative, establishes good working relationships both within and outside of the lab, actively looks for ways to improve processes and provides suggestions positively. Ultimately, MLTs and MLAs need to have a level of self-motivation to hunt down opportunities and start talking to people, particularly in other professions, about getting involved. Laboratory managers and supervisors also can play a role in encouraging these opportunities by creating an environment that fosters employee development and growth.

Key Takeaways

In a system-wide project, there are many moving parts that require coordination at a high level. The running theme in this type of work is that communication is key, and it takes an entire community to make meaningful change. Becoming involved in large

interdisciplinary initiatives may be out of the comfort zone of many laboratory professionals, or they may feel helpless in knowing how to get started. The staff at Shared Health Manitoba emphasized the importance of relationship building and networking, both of which take time, effort and intention. It's also important to appreciate that health care is a complex environment. Developing an understanding of the pressures and trends in the broader system and allowing that to shape feedback about areas of improvement emphasizes a willingness to work with a diverse team. 



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Choosing Wisely Canada helped create the "Why Give Two When One Will Do?" toolkit to support institutions looking to improve RBC unit utilization. Find it on the Tools and Products page at [LabWisely.ca](https://www.labwisely.ca)