



Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Budget

From: The Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists (CAMRT)

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Recommendations

CAMRT recommends that the Federal government:

- 1. Invest in the hiring and retention of MRTs as part of a health human resource strategy to reduce backlogs and improve health services**
- 2. Direct funding to provinces to expand the number of available seats for the education of MRTs across Canada**
- 3. Extend the student loan forgiveness program for healthcare professionals working in rural and remote communities to include the MRT profession**
- 4. Continue to invest in programs specifically designed to address the mental health of the healthcare workforce**

About Medical Radiation Technologists in Canada

Medical radiation technologists (MRTs) provide the essential link between compassionate care and the sophisticated medical imaging and therapeutic technologies that underpin modern healthcare. In total, more than 22,000 technologists are working across Canada within the medical imaging areas of radiologic technology, nuclear medicine, magnetic resonance, and the practice of radiation therapy.

About the CAMRT

Established in 1942, the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists (CAMRT) is the national professional association and certifying body for MRTs. CAMRT is recognized in Canada and internationally as a leading advocate for the profession.

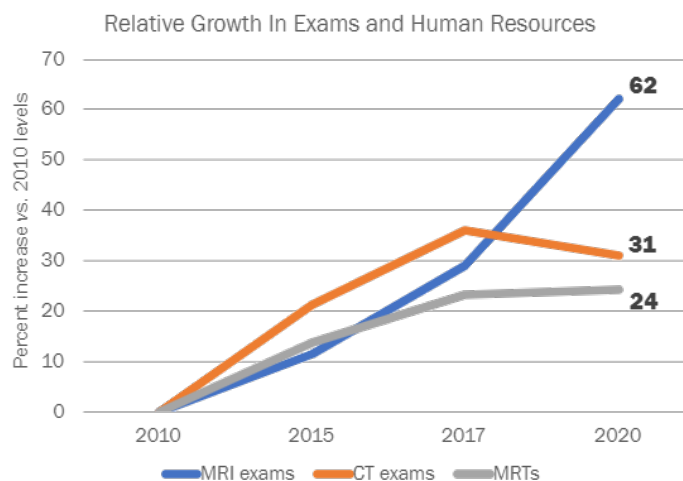
Medical radiation technologists care for and interact with patients at some of the most critical junctures in their care. Millions of patients depend on medical imaging every year to help guide their diagnosis, care and recovery. Hundreds of thousands more depend on highly targeted radiation therapy to treat their cancer. In 2023, the instances where MRTs interact with patients have become bottlenecks for the Canadian healthcare system.

Since well before COVID-19, Canada has struggled with long wait times for critical imaging exams like CT scans, PET scans and MRIs. These long wait times have grown and have now become entrenched in many parts of the country. The latest CIHI data showed national median wait time for an MRI scan sitting at 41 days, with median wait times exceeding 90 days in some provinces like Manitoba and Nova Scotia. All exceed the target of 30 days for this marker. Patients with lower priority exams (200,000+ across Canada based on 2020 numbers) are still routinely waiting five to six months on average, with some waiting years for this care.²

Because these exams often come early in a patient’s interaction with the healthcare system, delays of this magnitude also create a cascade of further delays, leading to months of anxiety, uncertainty, unresolved health issues, and delays to surgeries and other procedures.

Underinvestment has led to MRT shortages across the country

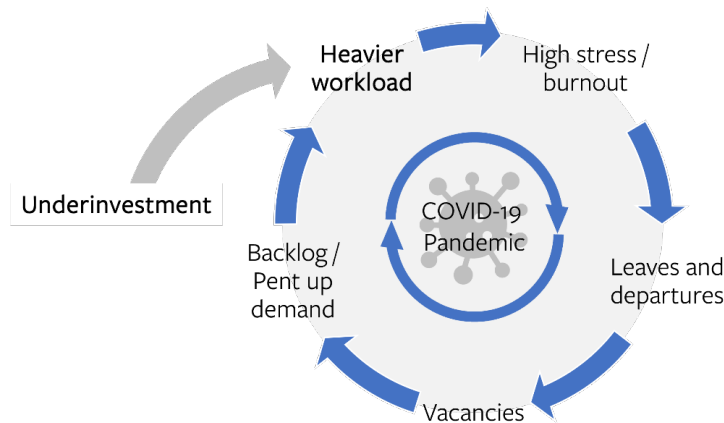
The origin of these bottlenecks in medical radiation technology is due to chronic underinvestment in its workforce. With an aging population, demand for services in Canada has grown much faster than investment in medical imaging and radiation therapy.



In the area of CT scanning, there was a 31% increase in scans between 2010 and 2020, an absolute increase of 1,297,663 scans nationwide. In MRI, the number of exams increased by

62% over the same time frame, a total of 895,724 more scans.³ By contrast, investment in the MRT workforce did not keep pace – the growth in the MRT ranks over the same decade was 24%, well below the increases in exams performed.⁴

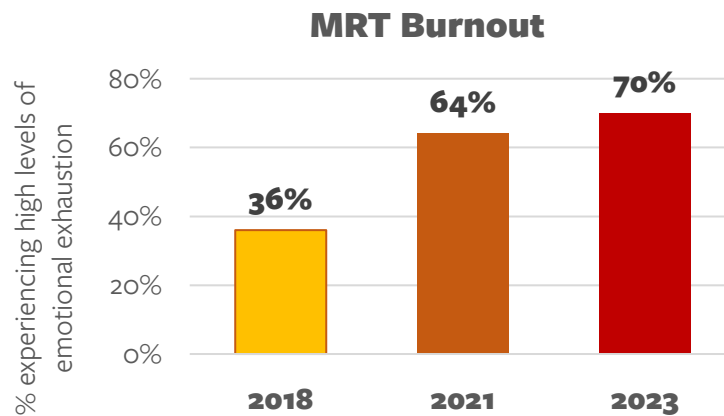
To respond to this unrelenting growth in demand, MRTs have been consistently asked to do more with less. But the shortcut measures typically imposed by administrators on the workforce (like running services 24 hours a day and over weekends) only provide temporary hope for shorter provincial wait times. All the while, these measures wear the critical MRT workforce thin. With COVID-19, its disruptions, and the ensuing catch-up period, the cycle has been accelerated to the point there is now a critical MRT workforce crisis.



As the national association, CAMRT collects detailed information on the state of the MRT workforce. The research reveals a troubling picture of burnout, departures from the profession and rising vacancy levels across Canada.

- MRT burnout has risen to critical levels*

A national mental health survey conducted by CAMRT and partners in 2018 revealed that 36% of MRTs experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion (an indicator of burnout).⁵ By 2021, this rate had nearly doubled to 64%.⁵ Preliminary data from CAMRT’s 2023 mental health survey shows that this crisis is deepening, not improving – 70% of MRT respondents now exhibit high levels of emotional exhaustion.⁶



- A third of MRTs are considering leaving*

With prolonged stress and burnout, depersonalization has also grown in the workforce. A survey CAMRT members took part in asked professionals whether they were considering leaving their positions for reasons other than retirement – 35% of MRT respondents indicated they were. Nearly all would choose to leave healthcare entirely.⁷
- Severe workforce shortages across the country*

Not surprisingly, this crisis in MRT stress and mental health also reveals itself in vacancy numbers across the profession. CAMRT’s most recent MRT workforce survey (captured in late 2021) showed vacancy levels rising in all the major disciplines and subspecialty areas of medical imaging and radiation therapy. Vacancy levels in the high-demand areas of CT imaging and MRI were in excess of 10%, three-to-four times the levels required for sustainability.⁸ In absolute terms, this amounts to many hundreds of vacancies unfilled across the country.
- The system is vulnerable to acute disruptions*

In November of 2022, a diagnostic imaging centre in Saint-André-Avellin, Quebec, was closed for two weeks due to a critical shortage in MRTs.⁹ When Newfoundland’s only radiation therapy centre lost more than 30% of its workforce, it addressed the situation by closing a treatment unit, reducing service and sending cancer patients to Toronto for their cancer care.¹⁰ These are but two examples that made news from a country made vulnerable to shutdowns at any time by this MRT shortage.

Investing to bolster Canada's MRT workforce

The CAMRT believes that this situation, as dire as it is, can be remedied with appropriate attention and investment. While MRTs are considering leaving the profession at alarmingly high levels, the same respondents indicated a willingness to remain if their primary concerns are addressed. For the moment, it is clear that the primary concern of the majority of MRTs across Canada is staffing shortages and the problems associated with them.

Helping MRTs by bolstering the workforce is a start. Based on the workforce data we collect, the CAMRT and the Canadian Association of Radiologists (CAR) estimate that 2,000 MRTs need to be added to the Canadian healthcare system in the next three years.

Recently, the Federal government has demonstrated a clear role for national leadership in health. The Canadian public has taken note, and according to polls, they welcome their continued leadership. In fact, a recent poll showed 90% of Canadians support federal government investment to shorten medical imaging backlogs.¹¹

As such, **the CAMRT calls on the Federal government to work in collaboration with the provinces to establish strategies and funding to address the historic backlogs in medical imaging with particular consideration for the growing human resources crisis in the MRT profession.**

The primary means by which meaningful numbers of MRTs can be added to the Canadian workforce is through MRT education in Canada. But despite the deepening MRT workforce crisis, provinces have been slow to respond with the increases in seats required. Because MRT education is specialized, with disciplines like MRI, nuclear medicine and radiation therapy, not every province has the capacity to educate its own specialized workforce. Relying on investments from neighbouring provinces, in a time of interprovincial competition for available graduates, puts many provinces at a disadvantage. The Federal government is uniquely placed to help provinces address these gaps and ensure all Canadians continue to have access to a healthy MRT workforce.

As such, **the CAMRT recommends that the Federal government direct funding to provinces to expand the number of available seats for the education of MRTs across Canada.**

Supporting the existing workforce

As previously mentioned, the rate of burnout in the MRT profession is now double what it was in 2018.^{5,6} Even as steps are taken to bolster the MRT workforce, this decline in mental health poses a risk for increased exits from the profession, leaves of absence, and a further exacerbation of the workforce crisis.

The CAMRT is encouraged by investments the government has already made for the mental health of the health workforce, and we support the recommendation made by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (HESA) that “*the Government of Canada work with the provinces and territories to implement a Pan-Canadian Mental Health Strategy for health care workers*”.¹²

Many stakeholders consulted during this study called specifically for the direction of federal government funding to the provinces and territories for the improvement of access to administrative and mental health supports in primary and secondary care settings.

The CAMRT calls on the Federal government to work with the provinces and territories to create programs specifically designed to address the mental health of the healthcare workforce.

Loan forgiveness for MRTs

In its 2022 budget, the federal government committed to expanding the current list of eligible professionals under its student loan forgiveness program. Despite this commitment, MRTs are still ineligible for loan forgiveness. The importance of developing strategies to recruit and support healthcare workers for rural, remote and northern areas was reiterated by the House of Commons Standing Committee for Health (HESA).¹² Given this, and the vital role the MRT profession plays in the delivery of healthcare to Canadians in rural and remote locations:

The CAMRT calls on the Federal government to extend the student loan forgiveness program for healthcare professionals working in rural and remote communities to include the MRT profession.

As you know, the roles MRTs play are central to the Canadian healthcare system. Medical imaging is the keyhole to a remarkable range of healthcare services, and 50% of cancer patients receive radiation therapy. The future of the healthcare system depends on a healthy and appropriately staffed MRT workforce.

The CAMRT believes action on the recommendations herein will help solve a deepening workforce crisis in the MRT profession, and in doing so ensure the recovery of healthcare as a whole. Just as importantly, they will allow Canada to grow and improve health care for the future and deliver the standard Canadians hope and expect to receive from their healthcare system.

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