

Letter to the editor

Laboratory accreditation: If we can do it so can you!

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I would like to share my experience in attempting to accredit the histopathology laboratory at Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH). Histopathology laboratories in private hospitals have been accredited. However, there isn't a single histopathology laboratory in the Ministry of Health or University system which has achieved this status. The Army hospital histology laboratory was the only non-private histology lab to get accredited last year

This subject was mentioned a decade ago in an editorial in this Journal 2012(7)1;4-5 and has been dormant since then. I would like to encourage others to follow suite and work towards obtaining laboratory accreditation.

Introduction

At the beginning of this process, I had absolutely no understanding of what accreditation truly meant, and I would never have imagined that getting the histopathology laboratory at the Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH) accredited would take over three years of dedication, learning and teamwork. I would like to share this experience with other Pathologists in Sri Lanka, because if we could do it, so can you!

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The beginning

In the beginning, I was like many other pathologists and had a limited understanding of accreditation. The first few years felt like walking in the dark, with no clear path ahead, but I was not alone. Many colleagues and the assessors from the Sri Lanka Accreditation Board (SLAB) guided me through this complex process, offering advice, direction and support at every step. Despite their invaluable help, I didn't truly appreciate what accreditation meant until the very end of this long journey.

Turning point

The turning point came during the pandemic, when SLAB offered a free course on accreditation which was held online for seven days. My Senior Medical Laboratory Technologist (SMLT) and I both attended this course. To our regret, we didn't fully grasp the importance of the content until the final lecture. We felt as though we had wasted valuable time, not paying attention to earlier sessions that could have made a huge difference.

In hindsight, we both agree that it is crucial to pay attention from the beginning. We also feel that accreditation, though incredibly challenging, is essential. Even if full accreditation is out of reach for some labs, striving for it can still lead to significant improvements in quality. Accreditation may seem like a daunting task, especially for laboratories that face constraints, but it is an

effort worth pursuing, no matter how difficult.

True meaning of a "Laboratory Accreditation"

One common misconception about accreditation, especially among pathologists, is that it is all about improving the quality of slides. While slide quality is definitely important, it is not the only factor that defines a successful laboratory. Accreditation requires a complete overhaul of the laboratory system. It's not just about making high quality slides; it's about implementing and maintaining a solid system that can ensure continuous quality improvement.

Imagine preparing for a wedding – the bride, groom, food etc are all planned. Getting accreditation is like that. But the hardest part comes after the wedding. Maintaining and sustaining a positive life with your spouse, families and relations must be done.

As in the above scenario; accreditation can be gained by the documentation, the work involved, the planning etc., but maintaining those systems, especially with the frequent change of staff is a must.

At LRH, there is constant turnover of support staff, orderlies, and medical laboratory technicians (MLTs). Thankfully, I as the pathologist have been consistent through this journey. However, with changing staff it becomes even more challenging to maintain the established systems.

Roadmap to accreditation

The roadmap to accreditation is outlined in the ISO 15189 booklet¹, which at first felt like a foreign language to me. For years, I struggled to fully understand it. However, I was fortunate enough to have colleagues from LRH, Kandy, Castle Street and Colombo South hospitals who provided guidance. Slowly, the documents were created and structures developed in accordance with these requirements.

Today, I am happy to share all the documents we developed to help other hospitals with this process, keeping in mind that these

documents must be adapted to fit each hospital's specific needs.

Attributes for success

1.Dedication: At least one person with 100% dedication to the cause, for a minimum of three years is essential. Changing and maintaining systems requires time and commitment.

2.Support from authorities: Accreditation demands fulfilling several requirements. For this, the support of the relevant authorities is a must.

3.A team of supportive individuals: It is not essential for every member of the team to fully understand the process, but their cooperation and willingness to go along with the changes is the key. Opposition from the team can derail the entire process.

Advantages of accreditation

1.Methodical acceptance/rejection:

Acceptance and rejection of samples can be done in a methodical way so that most errors are resolved upon acceptance.

2.Methodical turnaround times: Patients no longer have to wait outside the laboratory for reports, thanks to the improved efficiency of our system.

3.Easier workflow: Once a method is established, work becomes much smoother.

4.Improved slide quality: Accreditation has led to noticeable improvements in the quality of our slides, which is an ongoing process.

One of the biggest lessons learned during this process is the need for continuous education for everyone involved in the process. Unfortunately, MLTs and pathologists are not adequately trained in quality matters during their initial training, especially when it comes to maintenance of equipment and reagents. Documentation of these processes is not difficult; what is necessary is developing a method and consistently adhering to it. Similarly, SMLTs should receive proper guidance on equipment maintenance.

Conclusion

To make work easier in the long term, we had to put in double the effort initially to establish a proper system. It was a lot of hard work, but now that we have been successful in obtaining accreditation, we are delighted. The road to accreditation may be long, difficult and full of hurdles, but with the right team, dedication and support, it's absolutely achievable.

I feel that even if not all laboratories are able to reach full accreditation status, every laboratory should aim to improve quality and maintain the level of standard that they achieve. As pathologists, laboratory technicians, and medical professionals, it is our responsibility to push for better standards. Accreditation is a process that will challenge you, but it will also elevate the quality of your work and the service you provide to your patients.

I am happy to share our experiences, documents, and lessons learned along the way and am more than willing to assist anyone who needs guidance or has questions regarding this. Together, we can all strive to improve the quality of our laboratories, one step at a time.

Acknowledgements

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References

1. ISO. ISO 15189:2022(en). Medical laboratories — Requirements for quality and competence. International Organization for Standardization; 2022.