

What is IQLM? *Establishing the Institute for Quality in Laboratory Medicine*

In April 2003, a Quality Institute Conference convened key stakeholders to Atlanta, Georgia to discuss the role of laboratory medicine in addressing health care problems. A broad cross-section of the health care community participated in the meeting, which was hosted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These participants envisioned the creation of a new organization that could engage the health care community in improving laboratory services.

At the Quality Institute Conference, guest speaker, Lucian Leape, MD, with the Harvard School of Public Health, stated, “The idea that medical errors are caused by bad systems is a transforming concept.”

“The Institute of Medicine report, *Crossing the Quality Chasm*, challenges health care providers to make systematic changes to our nation’s health care,” noted Joe Boone, PhD, Associate Director for Science at the Office of Public Health Partnerships at the CDC. “The laboratory is a proven leader in establishing quality processes for the analytical phase of testing, but more can be accomplished by opening communications among laboratory professionals, clinicians, health systems, and patients.”

CDC took the recommendations from the conference and initiated plans for a new public-private partnership organization to engage the health care community in improving the use of laboratory tests and services. “The Institute for Quality in Laboratory Medicine (IQLM) will be the first organization bringing together clinicians and laboratory professionals to work on advancing substantial improvements in quality, effectiveness, safety and appropriateness for the broad universe of laboratory testing,” noted Toby Merlin, MD, Director for Public and Private Partnerships at the CDC.

The IQLM seeks to become a trusted source for information on laboratory practices. “Many organizations have made significant contributions to the advancement of the quality of laboratory practices,” explained Dr. Merlin. “But, no one group has the resources or the needed integration to move the quality agenda to the next level.”

The IQLM aims to provide a forum for a diversity of organizations to discuss mechanisms to improve the quality and safety of laboratory services. “This ability to work collectively to address issues of communication, accountability, technology, and evidence-based practices is a cornerstone of the IQLM,” adds Dr. Boone.

Robin Stompler, principal of a Washington-based health care development company, is working with the CDC to assist in bringing together all significant parties interested in improving the health of the public through the better use of laboratory tests. “The broad laboratory community includes laboratory professionals, clinicians, accrediting organizations, payers, health systems, device manufacturers, bio- and information technology, patients and government agencies,” said Ms. Stompler. “While groups

representing these interests have collaborated in the past, there was not one organization, until now, that brought all these parties together dedicated in a mission to promote improvements in laboratory testing and services. IQLM provides an unique opportunity.”

The IQLM Agenda

It may be best to describe the IQLM by what it is not. The IQLM is not an accrediting, licensing, or regulatory body. It will not provide an approval process for medical devices, and it is not a standard-setting establishment for laboratory professionals or laboratory practices. “Other organizations provide these services, not IQLM,” explained Dr. Boone.

The IQLM has outlined its preliminary agenda as follows:

- Promote evidence-based laboratory practices that lead to substantial improvements in quality, effectiveness, safety and appropriateness of clinical care for patients
- Support research in the design and delivery of effective laboratory services
- Provide a forum for partners in laboratory services to discuss mechanisms to improve the quality and safety of laboratory services
- Develop and promote the best indicators for measuring the quality of laboratory tests and services
- Develop networks of laboratories that provide regular, factual information on the state of laboratory practice
- Present a driving force for continuous quality improvement in laboratory tests and services
- Translate laboratory research into practical strategies for improving health care
- Develop educational programs to promote best practices
- Endow fellowship programs to conduct laboratory services research

“Over time, specific goals and activities will be set for the IQLM using this agenda as a floor plan,” said Dr. Merlin.

The Partners

Over seventy organizations have agreed to join with the CDC in making the IQLM a reality. This collaboration of groups will assist in furthering the IQLM agenda. According to Ms. Stompler, “these organizations collectively represent over 350,000 physicians, approximately 200,000 laboratory professionals, 1200 health care manufacturing companies, cutting edge biotechnologies, major accrediting bodies, all state public health laboratories, three million volunteers dedicated to improving the health of mothers and children, federal government agencies, and a significant share of the nation’s hospitals.”

“Reactions to the IQLM have varied,” she noted. Some groups expressed excitement over the endeavor and urged prompt action to establish fully the IQLM. Others were

more cautious, raising flags over the long-term viability of such an organization. “Even those organizations expressing healthy skepticism seemed pleased with the mission,” Ms. Stompler explained. “The enthusiasm for advancing a quality agenda, in a non-regulatory setting, was apparent.”

“We want all parties at the table,” Dr. Merlin summarized. “This integration should be a model for how laboratory services are actually delivered and communicated.”

The IQLM has convened the first meeting of its technology partnership council in February 2005. Senior executives from over twenty-five major companies joined together to discuss ways to promote improvements in laboratory tests and services. “The first meeting of the council was highly successful with the group suggesting future directions and activities for the IQLM to pursue,” noted Steve Solomon, MD, Acting Director of the CDC National Center for Health Marketing. The council is comprised of representatives of *in vitro* diagnostic corporations, information technology companies, biotechnology firms, and independent laboratories.

The Work Groups

The IQLM established two work groups to develop a process for (1) identifying a core set of indicators for quality in laboratory medicine and (2) identifying and demonstrating the feasibility of networks to collect critical information related to laboratory quality.

The IQLM Networks Workgroup is responsible for advising the Institute on what networks to develop, how to establish linkages among a diversity of laboratories, and to assist in the implementation of such networks. “We are delighted with the caliber of individuals that have volunteered to serve on the workgroup,” noted Barbara Goldsmith, PhD, Chair of the IQLM Networks Workgroup and Vice President of Laboratory Services for Caritas Christi Health Care in Boston, Massachusetts. “Together, we will expand on the successful demonstration survey of hospital laboratories to learn the best policies and benchmarking opportunities to improve safety and quality in laboratory medicine.”

The IQLM Indicators Workgroup is responsible for advising the Institute on which performance measures to study, what processes to use in evaluating indicators, and to assist in developing pilot tests for the indicators. “The Institute seeks to strengthen the development of indicators that monitor the state of laboratory medicine’s contribution to the nation’s health,” explained Lee Hilborne, MD, MPH, Chair of the IQLM Indicators Workgroup and Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Center for Patient Safety and Quality at the UCLA School of Medicine in Los Angeles, California. “IQLM is evaluating indicators for laboratory medicine that are broad-based, are consistent with evidence, and are acknowledged by the clinical community.”

The Future

Growing from the initial concept, the IQLM has become an independent, incorporated entity with its own Board of Directors and staff. An active agenda accompanies this growth.

Subscriptions to the complimentary IQLM monthly newsletter are available to all interested individuals. To sign-up for the newsletter, or to volunteer your expertise, please visit www.iqlm.org.

“Separately, each organization and each individual associated with the IQLM has significant skills to contribute to the quality debate,” said Dr. Boone. “IQLM intends to utilize those skills collectively to advance the debate into action on behalf of the health of the public.”