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Current State and Needs of Clinical Laboratories in Latin America: A Cross-Country Assessment.

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Randy Kaye:

Hello, and welcome to this edition of *JALM Talk* from *The Journal of Applied Laboratory Medicine*, a publication of the Association for Diagnostics & Laboratory Medicine. I'm your host, Randy Kaye.

The Association for Diagnostics & Laboratory Medicine (ADLM) Global Lab Quality Initiative (GLQI) aims to develop and implement programs that promote education and training in laboratory medicine for low- or middle-income countries and regions worldwide.

For 15 years, the Latin-American Working Group has supported the ADLM GLQI by developing and implementing activities that promote education and training and laboratory medicine for countries in Latin-America and the Caribbean.

To better understand the training needs of laboratory professionals across Latin-America and the Caribbean, the Latin American Working Group, recently renamed The Latin-America Subcommittee, conducted a systematic needs assessment for laboratorians in Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, el Salvador, The Dominican Republic, and Bolivia. The goal of this assessment was to develop an accurate picture, understand the situation of regional needs and develop tailored interventions that maximize impact. The July 2026 issue of *JALM* features a special report that presents the findings of this needs assessment.

Today, we are joined by the special report's corresponding author, Dr. Jessica Colón-Franco. Dr. Colón-Franco is Laboratory Services Director at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and Associate Professor of Pathology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. A Diplomate of the American Board of Clinical Chemistry and fellow of the ADLM Academy, she currently serves as chair of ADLM's Latin American Subcommittee after previously contributing as member and consultant and is the incoming chair of the Health Access and Equity Division. Her interests include advancing laboratory medicine through

clinical service, education, stewardship, and international collaboration, including leading a multinational assessment of laboratory needs across Latin-America.

Welcome Dr. Colón-Franco. For listeners who may not be familiar with it, what is the Latin American Subcommittee of ADLM and what role does it play in advancing laboratory medicine across the region?

Jessica
Colón-Franco:

Thank you for having us have this discussion and for the opportunity to tell your listeners about the Latin America Subcommittee.

As you mentioned before, it was previously known as the Latin American Working Group and this group is supported through the ADLM Global Lab Quality Initiative and also the generosity of the Wallace H Coulter Foundation. And what this group has done is that over 15 years, we've worked with several partners along the region of Latin America to help with education, mentorship, and provide practical resources that can help laboratory strengthen quality and better serve their communities.

Our main focus has been education and capacity building and our volunteers, which you can meet the team at myadlm.org, on their advocacy and outreach, global affairs. And the [Latin America Subcommittee tab](#) provides workshops, webinars, professional development opportunities, and collaborations to help laboratory implement quality practices, adopt new technologies, for example, through our workshops on method development and method validation, and improve diagnostic services.

What makes this committee unique is our commitment to working alongside professionals from the respective countries and delivering education in their preferred language and context. So our workshops are delivered in Spanish and a workshop in Brazil was delivered in English and translated to Portuguese real time.

Randy Kaye:

All right. Thank you. So, what motivated your subcommittee to undertake a cross-country assessment of clinical laboratories across Latin America?

Jessica
Colón-Franco:

The assessment that we did was really an extension of the mission of the subcommittee. We wanted to understand better the challenges that laboratorians face today so we could continue providing support.

So, in other words, our motivation was very simple. Before continuing developing our educational programs, we wanted

to hear directly from laboratorians and give them a voice to let us know what they need the most. We've worked in the region for many years but places are evolving, health care is evolving, technology is evolving, and we felt that it was very important to move beyond our assumptions and have a more systematic way to gather this data.

Another important motivator was the diversity of Latin America. Countries differ vastly in resources, infrastructure, and regulation, so to date, there had not been a comprehensive region-wide assessment focused on the needs of laboratory professionals. Also, in addition to the variability across countries, even within a country there might be variability of resources especially as you move from the more urban areas into the more through rural areas.

So, we felt that this could help us identify common themes, understand some of the regional priorities, and help us create a roadmap for future development of educational and professional development initiatives that could have the greatest impact for professionals practicing in the region.

Randy Kaye: So what were the most important or maybe surprising findings that emerged from the assessment?

Jessica Colón-Franco: To us it was reassuring but also an important finding that access to continuing education was the number one challenge identified by laboratory professionals. Almost 60% of the respondents selected it as a major need, making it overall the most frequently reported challenge across the survey.

Something important and interesting was the strong preference for flexible learning. This was surprising to us that over 80% of respondents prefer virtual education, although they still value in-person learning opportunities. Bringing us this piece of information allows us, and highlights to us, how important is that we focus on developing educational programs that are accessible regardless of our ability to get there on-site, in-person.

It was also surprising to us that regulatory oversight and quality management were still listed as priorities but not identified as top priorities by many respondents. Quality and accreditation has been a major area of focus in the programs that we deliver so we expected that to perhaps rank higher. So one possibility for this is that laboratories are concentrating on other more immediate challenges like staffing shortages, funding limitations, access to instrumentation, equipment, and continuing education.

Randy Kaye: All right, thank you. So you talked about several needs within laboratory medicine systems and obviously education is really

important, but what issues do you think are the most urgent to address?

Jessica
Colón-Franco:

Given the results of the assessment and what participants reveal to us, I believe that the most urgent issue right now is strengthening access to continuing professional education and workforce development.

We know that in the last decade, lab medicine has evolved rapidly. The way we deliver medicine with access to telemedicine and many technologies, also technologies in the laboratory equipment are evolving and have evolved rapidly and laboratorians in Latin-America need to be provided with opportunities to stay current with these advances and technologies in diagnostics.

Something that emerged is an important need to address that also feel similar to us that practice in the United States is workforce sustainability. Many participants, whether in the survey or in interviews, describe staffing shortages and workloads as a challenge to not only practice but to attend training or engage in career development. And these again highlights the need to deliver flexible ways of learning.

Another challenge that they are facing in Latin America is expanding us access to resources, including reagents and quality programs, both internal and external quality assessment programs. And addressing these issues are a little bit more complex and require collaboration among laboratories, professional societies, the government, and our industry partners to work with leaders in the region to help them address some of these needs that emerged in the survey.

Randy Kaye:

So that's a lot of challenges to laboratory medicine. How do these challenges affect patient care and public health outcomes in Latin-America?

Jessica
Colón-Franco:

Yeah, only through the survey but also through interviews, we learn how closely these laboratory challenges are tied to the broader economic and health care realities within the communities. Laboratories are often being creative and adapting to resource constraints while trying to respond to the needs of the communities that they serve.

Globally, this is not exclusive to Latin-America. Laboratory challenges, laboratory medicine challenges, have a direct impact on patient care because laboratory results guide most clinical decisions.

Through the interviews and through the survey, we learned challenges related to the chronic diseases that they observe as most prevalent in the communities including cancer, infectious disease, and other public health threats.

What really reinforced this to us was the opportunity to visit laboratories throughout the region. So, not only we conducted the survey but during our in-person workshops we have had the chance to visit laboratories. And during our visits, we have seen incredibly dedicated lab professionals who are doing remarkable work despite significant limitations. We've met teams that are eager to implement best practices and improve quality while balancing competing priorities such as staffing shortages and budget constraints.

One example that stands out for us is the collaboration of ADLM and the Latin America Subcommittee in Bolivia around cardiovascular disease. Dr. Veronica Lucy, she is the past chair of the Latin America Subcommittee, saw firsthand how strengthening laboratory services and working around point-of-care testing, providing the tools, the resources, can help improve early detection and management of a chronic disease that is a major public health concern.

Randy Kaye: Thank you. So that's a little bit of optimism at the end of all those challenges. So, looking ahead, what else gives you the most optimism about the future of laboratory medicine in Latin America?

Jessica Colón-Franco: What gives me the most optimism is the passion and commitment of laboratory professionals that we've countered throughout this project, this needs assessment project, and also our visits to Latin-America. We found a deep dedication to quality, innovation and education, and patient care.

Something that also encourages me greatly is the continuous opportunities for collaboration, how opening and welcoming they are for collaborations by professional organizations, alongside national societies, their academic institutions, health care system, and other international partners to address common challenges and share these challenges and also expertise.

I'm also encouraged by access to technology and how available technology is and accessible is throughout Latin America, while recognizing that there is a need to assess the quality of that technology that is available. But all these taken together creates tremendous opportunities to expand access to high-quality laboratory medicine services across the Latin-American countries and the regions.

Randy Kaye: All right, thank you so much for joining us today, doctor.

Jessica

Colón-Franco: Thank for having me.

Randy Kaye:

That was Dr. Jessica Colón-Franco, discussing the *JALM* special report, "Current State and Needs of Clinical Laboratories in Latin America: A Cross-Country Assessment." Thanks for tuning in to this episode of *JALM* Talk. See you next time and don't forget to submit something for us to talk about.