

Hope for the Future of Laboratory Quality in the Philippines



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Editor's Note: In this issue of the Philippine Journal of Pathology, we spotlight a principle at the core of diagnostic medicine: quality. Though much of pathology's work is unseen, the accuracy of laboratory results guides every clinical decision. Few have advanced this cause as strongly as **Dr. Sarah Jane Datay-Lim**. In the interview that follows, Dr. Datay-Lim reflects on her path from stepping into quality assurance with no clear roadmap to becoming a leading advocate through the Philippine Council for Quality Assurance in Clinical Laboratories (PCQACL). Her experiences highlight both the country's progress and the challenges that remain in strengthening a true culture of quality. She underscores a shift in how we view quality—no longer as a punitive exercise, but as a collaborative, systems-oriented approach that promotes learning and continuous improvement. Her insights are timely as diagnostics evolve with genomics, point-of-care testing, digital pathology, and artificial intelligence. She calls for expanded external quality assessment, harmonized standards, and sustained education to build the next generation of quality champions. Ultimately, Dr. Datay-Lim reminds us that quality is about patients and the trust they place in laboratory medicine. We hope this conversation inspires continued commitment to a stronger, safer, and more accountable laboratory system for the Philippines.

What drew you to quality assurance in medical laboratories, and how has your perspective evolved since you first started in this field?

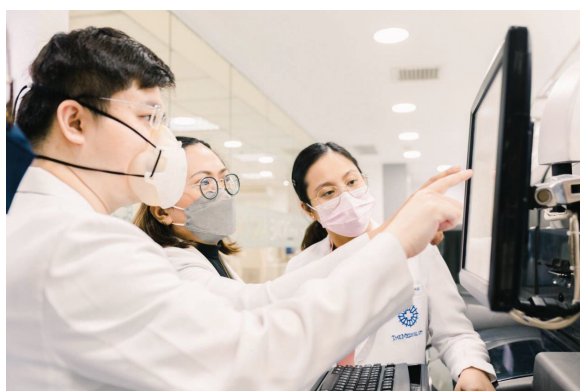
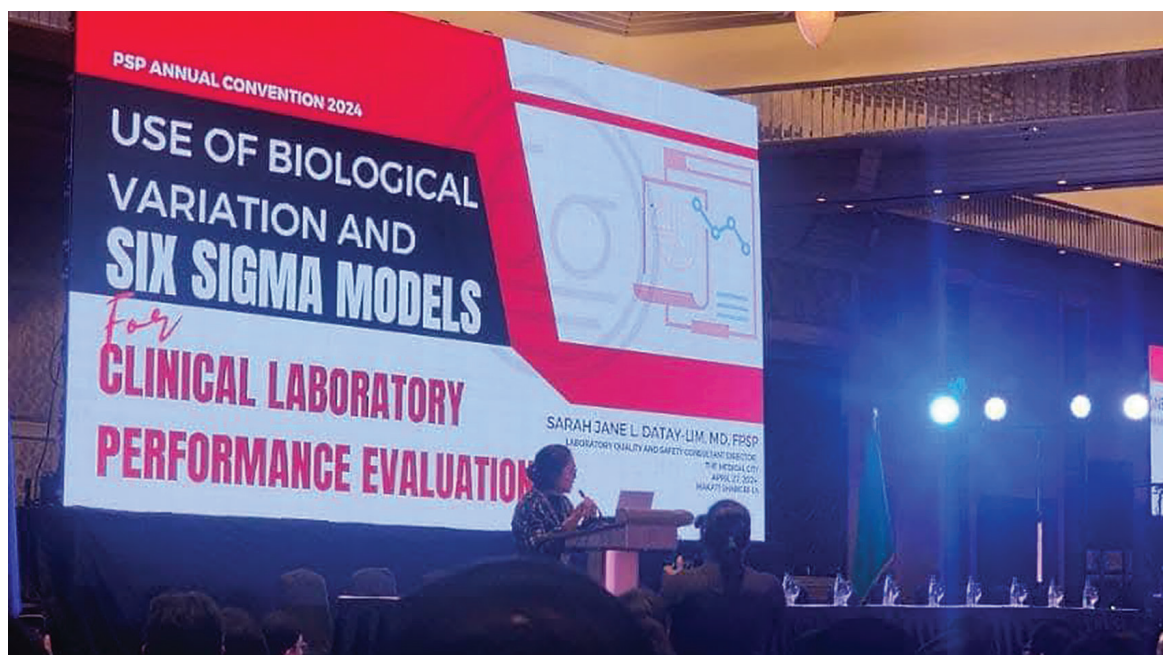
Initially, my journey into quality assurance was driven by necessity. While reviewing for the boards, our former chair, Dr. German B. Castillo Jr., offered me the position of Laboratory Quality Consultant Director at The Medical City. That opportunity became a strong motivator to pass the boards. However, once I started, I quickly realized how challenging the role was—there was no clear roadmap or guide to follow. Quality assurance is such a broad domain without clear boundaries that I often find myself in situations that make me ask, “*Is this still part of my responsibility?*”

I remember that there was even a time when my position was questioned, especially since the hospital already had its own quality department. That experience made me reflect deeply on the unique responsibilities within the laboratory and the importance of having someone dedicated to quality assurance in that specific setting.

Looking back, aside from the support by the people around me, what helped me grow in this role was volunteering with the Philippine Council for Quality Assurance in Clinical Laboratories (PCQACL). There, I was fortunate to be exposed to a network of experts both local and international... who generously shared their knowledge and best practices. Their influence was invaluable. I also took every training opportunity available such as auditor training and lean six sigma certifications... and invested in books and references to build my understanding and capabilities. I think this helped me appreciate my role in laboratory quality and gave me a clear picture on what I should aspire our laboratory to be.

In the past, quality assurance was often perceived as a restrictive and punitive process... effective only when rules were rigidly enforced and errors were penalized. But over time, as our understanding deepened and the healthcare landscape evolved, so did the approach to quality. For me, quality assurance is no longer about fault-finding or drawing hard lines between right and wrong. It's about helping laboratories identify opportunities for improvement and supporting them in building safer, more reliable systems. More often than not, errors are not the fault of individual staff members, but rather symptoms of systemic vulnerabilities. Recognizing this shifts the focus from blame to collaboration, and from punishment to progress. This is what I love about quality assurance and keeps me motivated to keep on going.





As former president of the Philippine Council for Quality Assurance in Clinical Laboratories, what moments or initiatives stand out as milestones in advancing laboratory quality in the country?

I think we made good progress with continued education and training, particularly in various disciplines of quality assurance and laboratory medicine. Seminars, webinars and workshops that focus on important topics such as internal quality control, proficiency testing, method validation, accreditation to name a few were regularly conducted, not just in the traditional platform but in other ways to cater to the changing times such as online. We also made good linkages with the international community which helped us align with the global standards. However, we need to be consistent and continue to share the good practices more so that we can influence not just laboratory professionals but also the regulatory bodies as well.

How would you describe the current state of quality assurance in clinical laboratories in the Philippines?

I believe we've made significant strides in recent years. For instance, the expansion of External Quality Assessment (EQA) schemes led by the National Reference Laboratories (NRLs) and the growing number of laboratories accredited

by reputable bodies are clear indicators of progress. However, when compared to the global landscape, we still have a long way to go. Many laboratory professionals continue to face challenges with foundational aspects of quality assurance, such as troubleshooting quality control issues. Moreover, the proportion of accredited laboratories in the Philippines remains relatively low compared to other countries, highlighting the need for more widespread and sustained efforts in this area. We also see many non-compliance with good practices and international/ local standards.

In your view, what are the most persistent gaps or challenges that laboratories face in meeting international standards like ISO 15189?

The most persistent gap I think is justifying the cost of quality. One of the most persistent gaps in quality assurance is ensuring that standards are not only well-documented but also genuinely implemented in daily practice. It's one thing to have policies in place, but translating them into consistent action remains a major challenge. Another significant hurdle is resource limitation. Convincing hospital administration to invest in quality can be difficult, especially when the returns are not immediately visible. However, it's important to emphasize that quality is not

an expense... it's an investment that ultimately leads to better outcomes, improved efficiency, and greater trust in laboratory services.

Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated or complicated the journey toward better quality systems in Philippine laboratories?

I believe the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the journey toward better quality systems in laboratories. It placed the laboratory at the forefront of healthcare, highlighting the critical role of diagnostics in patient care and public health. This heightened visibility brought with it greater expectations and accountability, pushing us to elevate our standards and performance. The impact of our work became more evident than ever, reinforcing the need for robust quality systems to ensure accurate, timely, and reliable results.

ISO 15189 accreditation is often seen as the "gold standard" for laboratories. In your experience, what is the most misunderstood aspect of ISO 15189?

I think one of the most misunderstood aspects of ISO 15189 is the belief that only large, well-funded laboratories can achieve accreditation. Many assume that the process is prohibitively expensive and complex, making it unattainable for smaller or resource-limited facilities. However, with the right mindset, commitment, and strategic planning, even modest laboratories can work toward compliance. Accreditation is not about perfection... it's about continuous improvement and building systems that ensure quality and patient safety.

What practical advice would you give to laboratories in resource-limited settings that aspire to meet ISO 15189 requirements?

I think a practical advice would be to read the standards, resource materials and attend seminars and webinars about ISO15189 as much as possible. Then perform a gap analysis to check your laboratory against the standards to be able to have an understanding of where you are and where you want to go.

How do you see accreditation impacting not only laboratory operations but also patient outcomes and trust in the health system?

Any form of laboratory accreditation can significantly enhance patient outcomes by establishing a strong framework for quality within laboratory systems. Accreditation promotes more accurate testing and reduces the likelihood of errors, which directly influences the quality of patient care and clinical decision-making. It builds trust in laboratory results and reinforces the role of diagnostics as a cornerstone of effective healthcare.

Quality assurance often requires a cultural shift within institutions. How do you foster a culture of quality among staff who may initially see QA as additional paperwork or bureaucracy?

I believe fostering a culture of quality starts with the leadership within the laboratory. Historically, quality



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assurance has often been viewed as punitive... focused on identifying who made a mistake rather than understanding why the mistake occurred. To shift this mindset, leaders must model a culture that encourages openness, learning, and collaboration. It's about promoting the recognition of errors not as failures, but as opportunities to improve systems and prevent recurrence. When staff see that leaders are genuinely committed to these principles (not just enforcing paperwork)... they begin to understand that quality is not an added burden, but an integral part of everyday practice.

In your opinion, what leadership qualities are most critical for driving quality improvement in the laboratory?

I believe the most important leadership quality in driving quality improvement is the ability to 'walk the talk'... to consistently model the behaviors and values we expect from our teams. Leaders must be open, approachable, and willing to listen and collaborate. Shifting the mindset of staff toward embracing quality requires more than directives: it demands authenticity, flexibility, and a shared commitment to continuous improvement. When staff see that quality is not just a checklist or paperwork, but something truly embedded in the way we work every day, they begin to take ownership of it themselves.

How can laboratory managers and pathologists mentor the next generation to be champions of quality?

The laboratory managers and pathologists can mentor the next generation to be champions of quality by involving them very early on. We must also communicate with them and make sure that they understand the vision and goals of the laboratory towards quality. This way, they do not just follow blindly but they understand why they are doing their tasks.

With new technologies such as genomics, point-of-care testing, and digital pathology becoming more prominent, what new quality assurance challenges do you foresee?

One of the emerging challenges in quality assurance is ensuring proper verification and validation of new and rapidly evolving technologies. As innovations like genomics, point-of-care testing, and digital pathology become more prevalent, laboratories must adapt their quality systems to accommodate these advancements. Preparing staff to competently manage and maintain these technologies is equally critical. Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence into clinical laboratories presents both opportunities and challenges... we must invest time and effort to understand its capabilities, limitations, and implications for quality and patient safety.

What role should the PSP, PCQACL, and government play in harmonizing standards nationwide?

These organizations and institutions have a big role to play in harmonizing the standards as experts in the field of laboratory medicine. We must work hand in-hand to make sure that we are at par with the global standards, starting perhaps first with critical aspects of laboratory quality such as internal quality control or something emerging such as point of care testing.

If you could chart a 10-year roadmap for laboratory quality in the Philippines, what would be your top priorities?

For laboratory quality perhaps the top priorities should be expansion of EQA scheme, empowering organizations on continuing medical education and research, creation and harmonization of standards lead by experts, and promotion of accreditation.

What lessons from your own career would you want young pathologists and medical technologists to carry with them as they face the pressures of balancing quality, cost, and patient care?

When I first stepped into the role of overseeing laboratory quality, I was overwhelmed by the scope and scale of the responsibilities. I quickly realized that meaningful change doesn't happen overnight... you can't do everything all at once. Instead, you focus on what you can do, one step at a time. Small, consistent efforts can create ripples that lead to significant impact over time. When people see that you lead by example... that you truly 'walk the talk', you not only earn their respect but also their support in driving quality improvement initiatives. In balancing all the demands of the role, I've learned that patient care and safety must always come first. That guiding principle helps keep everything in perspective. Lastly, always learn to be humble and accept mistakes because we are all human after all.

What gives you hope about the future of laboratory quality in the Philippines?

What gives me hope about the future of laboratory quality is whenever I see laboratory professionals very interested to learn about quality. I am happy to know we get overwhelming support in all the endeavors of PCQACL especially the seminars, conventions, webinars and other activities. It goes to show that everyone is interested to learn and grow.

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