

November 1998

GP9-A
Vol. 18 No. 15
Replaces GP9-T
Vol. 11 No. 20

Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline

This guideline provides an outline of reasons and criteria for choosing a referral laboratory. A checklist for evaluating potential referral laboratories is included to assist in the decision process.



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Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline

Abstract

This guideline, *Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline* (NCCLS document GP9-A), provides reasonable objective criteria to assist laboratory managers and directors with choosing a referral laboratory. The subcommittee that developed this guideline was comprised of laboratory professionals from commercial and state referral laboratories, government agencies, accrediting bodies, and hospitals and medical centers. With the benefit of this broad-based experience, we attempted to provide, primarily to laboratory managers and directors, an easily implemented, but thorough, procedure for evaluating and choosing a laboratory where routine or special analyses could be carried out most effectively. In Section 2, the guideline outlines the reasons for choosing a referral laboratory, and in Section 3, the criteria for selection. The document also contains a checklist, many of whose points correspond to the selection criteria covered in Section 3.

[NCCLS. *Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline*. NCCLS document GP9-A (ISBN 1-56238-357-4). NCCLS, 940 West Valley Road, Suite 1400, Wayne, PA 19087, 1998.]

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November 1998

GP9-A
ISBN 1-56238-357-4
ISSN 0273-3099

Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline

Volume 18 Number 15

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Suggested Citation

NCCLS. *Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline*. NCCLS document GP9-A (ISBN 1-56238-357-4). NCCLS, 940 West Valley Road, Suite 1400, Wayne, PA 19087-1898 USA, 1998.

Proposed Guideline

November 1985

Tentative Guideline

December 1991

Approved Guideline

November 1998

ISBN 1-56238-357-4

ISSN 0273-3099

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Foreword

A clinical laboratory often requires the assistance of an outside facility or facilities to perform unique or unusual services, as a backup service, or for routine services that the referring (primary) laboratory does not perform. Choosing a referral laboratory can be tedious, time-consuming, and difficult. It requires thorough research into the options available to today's laboratory director. This universal need for referral laboratory services underscores the need for guidelines to follow when choosing these services.

Deciding which laboratory to use can be based on several factors (e.g., references, cost, turnaround time, salesperson claims, proficiency, proximity, or "gut feelings"). Frequently it is only one of these criteria that is the deciding factor. While the cost of referral laboratory services may be an important consideration, the selection of a referral laboratory should be based primarily on the *quality* of services provided.

This guideline outlines steps to be used when evaluating a referral laboratory. The reasons for choosing a referral laboratory are outlined in Section 2. The criteria for selection are presented in Section 3 and includes information on how to evaluate the quality of referral laboratory services, facilities, equipment, personnel, quality control protocol, quality assurance/improvement activities, and instrument maintenance. This is followed by information on evaluating referral laboratories with regard to efficiency, scope of testing, specimen collection, test ordering, transportation, turnaround time, and result reporting.

This guideline will be useful and applicable both for selecting a referral laboratory and for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the selected laboratory.

Key Words

Referring (primary) laboratory, quality control, evaluation, selection.

Selecting and Evaluating a Referral Laboratory; Approved Guideline

1 Introduction

Nearly every clinical laboratory must use the services of a referral laboratory to process some portion of its workload; no formal and generally available criteria or guidelines have been developed to help in the selection process. The director of the referring laboratory is responsible for selecting a referral laboratory and for its ongoing evaluation based on objective evidence of acceptable quality and responsiveness in consultation with the institutional medical staff or physician clients where appropriate.

Laboratories that must select a referral laboratory will benefit from guidance which emphasizes comprehensive yet relevant criteria. Potential referral laboratories can also use guidance to evaluate internal operations and their ability to meet the needs of the primary referring laboratory.

1.1 Scope

This document provides guidance which emphasizes relevant and comprehensive criteria to aid laboratories in the process of selecting a referral laboratory. Similarly, potential referral laboratories will benefit from having a set of guideposts emphasizing relevant criteria accepted by consensus, to aid in evaluating and improving the quality of their operations.

This guideline presents objective criteria for choosing a referral laboratory and it provides a checklist to facilitate the process of selection.

2 Reasons for Choosing a Referral Laboratory

Common reasons for sending specimens to a referral laboratory are:

2.1 Unique or Unusual Service

The referral laboratory may provide a "one-of-a-kind" analysis or perform tests that are requested infrequently of the primary laboratory.

A referral laboratory might also be asked to confirm unusual or unexpected results obtained by the primary laboratory.

2.2 Backup Service

The referral laboratory may be asked to provide both routine and esoteric services when a short-term interruption of service at the referring laboratory is caused by instrument breakdown, unavailability of personnel, sudden increase in volume, or any other unscheduled or unanticipated situation.

2.3 Routine Service

The referral laboratory may perform routine tests on an ongoing basis tests which may be fundamental services but are not duplicated by the referring laboratory; or routine tests not performed during normal hours of operation such as nights, holidays, and weekends.

3 Criteria for Selection

Regardless of the nature of referral services requested by the primary laboratory, the selection criteria fall into three major related areas: quality of laboratory service, cost effectiveness, and efficiency of service. While the cost of referral laboratory services may be an important consideration, the selection of a referral laboratory should be based primarily on the *quality* of services provided.

3.1 Quality of Referral Laboratory Service

Although the assessment of quality is difficult, an objective evaluation can be made using a systematic approach. The referral laboratory should expect, permit, and encourage an on-site evaluation of its facility. On-site laboratory evaluation during peak operating hours is recommended and appropriate. Consider the following criteria in evaluating quality.

3.1.1 Facilities and Equipment

- (1) Determine whether the equipment, supplies, and instrumentation are consistent with the scope and volume of testing being conducted.
- (2) During an on-site visit, examine the physical facility, general level of