

# Accreditation: but to which standard?

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I recently had the pleasure of meeting Harry Alkema and Haig Agemain from Environment Canada's respected National Water Research Institute. We talked for several hours about the unit's work, their proficiency testing (PT) scheme and the CRMs they produce. The full story will be in *RM report* **1(5)**, which will be available in early December.

In reviewing their work we talked about their Accredited Status and it became clear that there are a number of differing approaches to the accreditation of PT schemes. This is not helpful: in the last RM Column [*Spectroscopy Europe* **14(4)**, 27 (2002)] I commented that the move to accreditation of CRM producers, as calibration laboratories, to ISO 17025 was a positive step and that within the framework of the ILAC and EA mutual recognition agreements it would work towards easier mutual recognition of CRMs.

In the PT world the evidence is not so clear as a comparison of the position the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom shows.

In the UK the situation is very clear. UKAS, the United Kingdom accreditation service accredits both PT and CRM providers to ISO 17025 as calibration laboratories. This process makes no discrimination between commercial or institutional providers; all must achieve the same standard. This is transparent, equitable and what the market wants.

In Canada SSC, the Standards Council of Canada does not yet accredit CRM producers, but PT providers to ILAC Guide 13. In the environmental area the accreditation procedure is delivered by CAEAL, the Canadian Association of Environmental Analytical Laboratories, but the accreditation is granted by SSC. As in the UK the accreditation process makes no discrimination between commercial or institutional providers.

But in the USA the position has in the last 18 months become very confused and there is growing disquiet amongst the commercial providers of CRMs and PT schemes.

The accreditation of PT providers in the waters and environmental sector is

carried out by NVLAP, administered by NIST. This has come about because the EPA, the original providers of the PT programs before privatisation, insisted it should be so and the State Governments, who are required to demonstrate proper control of water and waste analysis, require it to be so.

The NIST/NVLAP accreditation procedure is based on ISO Guide 25, the forerunner of ISO Standard 17025, it costly, time consuming and requires the PT providers take part in a "Super PT Scheme" administered by NIST.

There has been concern expressed by members of CRMMA, the US-based chemical reference material manufacturers association that the NVLAP accreditation is not driven by the needs of a mission to improve analytical quality, but by bureaucratic imperative. Furthermore, some claim that because of possible application of the US freedom of Information Act to NIST, a Government Agency, the confidentiality of the whole process could be compromised.

In other analytical areas A2LA accredits PT providers to ISO Guide 43 and ISO Standard 17025. The process is perceived to be inexpensive, quick and thorough. Because a number of members of CRMMA provide products and services to both the waters/environmental sector and other sectors they have been able to compare and contrast the accreditation processes. At the request of its clients A2LA announced in mid-1998 that it would begin to offer accreditation for PT providers in the water and waste sector during 1999. A couple of companies were accredited and the experience confirmed their view that A2LA met their needs better than NIST. They were not slow to publish this view, through CRMMA, NELAC and the INELA (Institute for National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation).

In July 2002 at a NELAC meeting in Tampa, Florida, the differences between all parties were well and truly aired. It became clear that the States were unwilling to accept A2LA: reading between the lines it seemed to a number of participants that I've spoken to that the reason was that A2LA is a

commercial company (just like UKAS) and therefore *may not be completely independent when dealing with commercial providers* (author's italics).

To add further fuel to the fire NIST announced that it could not afford to support the burden of running the NVLAP program as their agreement with the EPA had expired and the fees from accredited providers were insufficient!

None of this does anything to encourage international confidence in the data from US PT schemes. Worse, it makes a mockery of the aims and objectives of ILAC, the BIPM and the betterment of international recognition.

## Harry Klich: 1950–2002

As I was preparing to write this column news came in advising of the tragic death of Harry Klich, Chair of the influential ISO Technical Committee, REMCO. Harry was taken ill at the last REMCO meeting in May and died on 7 September. He was only 52.

In addition to his responsibilities at BAM and REMCO he was Chair of the BERM 9 Organising Committee and was leading the project to migrate the COMAR database to the Internet. He was a key member of the European Reference Materials Group of BAM, IRMM and LGC that promotes the work of European reference material producers, including the ERM Booth at Pittcon each year. He was involved with countless other chemical metrology related activities and travelled widely, promoting reference materials and representing BAM or ISO REMCO at international metrology meetings.

I first met Harry in the early 1990s when I was part of the Promochem team in Germany. Over the years, as my involvement with the international reference material community grew, I regularly worked with Harry. He worked tirelessly to advance the things that mattered to him, and reference materials were a big part of his life. Together with the many, many, people around the world with whom he collaborated and cooperated I will greatly miss him.