

# The Alphabet Soup of Government

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INDEX TERMS: Acronyms, Federal, Government

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. List the Departments in the President's Cabinet
2. Describe the acronyms most commonly associated with the Department of HHS
3. Differentiate between the acronyms for the Executive and Legislative branches departments, centers, offices and divisions
4. Identify the functions of the agencies and divisions of CDC, CMS and FDA

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Modern communication in our busy world is delivered in sound bites and text messages that use a new language: acronyms such as BFF (best friend forever) and DOS (disk operating system). Acronyms are defined as abbreviations composed of the initial letters or syllables of a compound term; many times, the letters can be pronounced as a single word<sup>1</sup>. The federal government is famous for acronyms and

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abbreviations that, while helpful for quick reference to those who work in government or with government officials, seem like a foreign language to the rest of the country. This article will attempt to translate some of the shorthand that is applied to the laboratory profession, organizing the information by branch of government. There is no pattern or logic that helps to predict the naming and subsequent acronyms or abbreviations so this compilation is alphabetical whenever possible.

### The Executive Branch

The executive branch of the United States government consists of the President, the executive offices and the cabinet. The President's Executive Office consists of a number of councils and offices; one that directly impacts the clinical laboratory is the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB helps the President develop the federal budget, monitors the effectiveness of the programs of each agency in the cabinet departments, and weighs the competing funding needs of each to set funding priorities.

The Cabinet consists of the Vice President and Secretaries of the following departments:

- Agriculture (USDA)
- Commerce
- Defense (DoD)
- Education
- Energy (DOE)
- Health and Human Services (HHS)
- Homeland Security (DHS)
- Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- Interior
- Labor
- Justice (DOJ)
- State
- Transportation (DOT)
- Treasury
- Veterans Affairs (VA)

The Departments whose activities have a major impact on clinical laboratories are Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor.

**FOCUS: THE GOVERNMENT AND YOU**

HHS: The Department of Health and Human Services has as its mission to protect the health of all Americans and provide essential health services. The department has over 300 programs. An overview of the acronyms and abbreviations for this department are found in Table 1.

The agencies within HHS of importance to laboratorians are:

**AHRQ:** Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality is the research arm of HHS. The research of this agency differs from the research done at the National Institutes of Health in that AHRQ researches health care systems, health care

quality and cost issues, access to health care, and effectiveness of medical treatments.

**CDC:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the lead federal agency for protecting the health and safety of the public. This is a complex agency with responsibilities that range from monitoring emerging infections and tracking vaccination rates to overseeing the nations' laboratories. This oversight is located in the Division of Laboratory Services.

**DLS:** Division of Laboratory Services, that division of CDC that focuses on laboratory quality improvement and quality systems development. Some of the activities

**Table 1: Major Acronyms and Abbreviations in HHS<sup>2</sup>**

- **ACF:** Administration for Children and Families
- **AHRQ:** Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality
- **AoA:** Administration on Aging
- **ASAM:** Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management
- **ASH:** Assistant Secretary for Health
- **ASL:** Assistant Secretary for Legislation
- **ASPA:** Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
- **ASPE:** Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation
- **ASPHEP:** Assistant Secretary for Public Health Emergency Preparedness
- **ASRT:** Assistant Secretary for Resources and Technology
- **ATSDR:** Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry
- **CDC:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- **CMS:** Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
- **DAB:** Departmental Appeals Board
- **DS:** Office of the Deputy Secretary
- **FDA:** Food and Drug Administration
- **HHS:** Health and Human Services
- **HRSA:** Health Resources and Services Administration
- **IGA:** Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- **IHS:** Indian Health Service
- **IOS:** Immediate Office of the Secretary
- **NCI:** National Cancer Institute
- **NIH:** National Institutes of Health
- **OCR:** Office for Civil Rights
- **OD:** Office on Disability
- **OGC:** Office of the General Counsel
- **OGHA:** Office of Global Health Affairs
- **OIG:** Office of the Inspector General
- **OMHA:** Office of Medicare Hearings and Appeals
- **PMA:** President's Management Agenda
- **SAMHSA:** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

instituted to fulfill that focus are:

**MASTER:** Multi-level Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing Resources, a CDC website that updates laboratory practitioners about antimicrobial susceptibility testing issues.

**MPEP:** Model Performance Evaluation Program, provides assessment of laboratories that perform HIV and TB testing.

**NLTN:** National Laboratory Training Network provides continuing education to laboratorians.

**CLIAAC:** Clinical Laboratory Improvement Advisory Committee. One of DLS's functions is to administer the CLIA program by managing the CLIAAC. This Advisory Committee was formed to provide scientific and technical advice and guidance to the Secretary; the Assistant Secretary for Health; the Director, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention; the Commissioner, Food and Drug Administration (FDA); and the Administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), regarding the need for, and the nature of, revisions to the standards under which clinical laboratories are regulated.

**CMS:** Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that administers the Medicare and Medicaid programs. This agency shares oversight of the nation's clinical laboratories with the CDC as a part of its mission. There is an entire division that writes regulations and enforces the federal law governing clinical laboratories. That law is:

**CLIA:** Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments of 1988. CMS regulates all laboratory testing (except research, forensic, and drug testing certified by SAMHSA) performed on humans in the US through the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA).

The CMS center that is devoted to setting the fees Medicare will pay for healthcare services provided to its beneficiaries also sets the fees for laboratory reimbursement. The three acronyms of interest to our payment are:

**CLFS:** Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule established by the Deficit Reduction Act of 1984 for reimbursement of Medicare Part B claims for clinical laboratory services.

**NLA:** National Limitation Amount enacted in 1986 by Congress to establish a ceiling on payment for every laboratory test.

**CPI:** Consumer Price Index, data on changes in the

prices paid by urban consumers for a representative basket of goods and services. The resulting index can be used to update the CLFS each year.

Another agency within HHS of importance to laboratory professionals is the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an agency "responsible for protecting the public health by assuring the safety, efficacy, and security of human and veterinary drugs, biological products, medical devices, our nation's food supply, cosmetics, and products that emit radiation" according to their website. There are two centers and an office of major interest to all in the laboratory community:

**CBER:** Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, regulates, among other things, the collection of blood and blood components as well as cell separators, HIV testing and other aspects designed to keep the blood supply safe.

**CDRH:** Center for Devices and Radiological Health, with responsibility to ensure the safety and effectiveness of medical devices.

**OIVD:** Office of *In Vitro* Diagnostic Device Evaluation, a division of CDRH that focuses on the safety and effectiveness of *in vitro* diagnostic devices (IVDs), the instruments and devices for clinical laboratory testing.

**HRSA:** Health Resources and Services Agency provides national leadership, program resources and services needed to improve access to a culturally diverse, competent workforce delivering quality health care. One bureau and one program of are particular importance to our profession:

**BHP:** Bureau of Health Professions composed of a number of branches that study the health care workforce to increase the diversity, numbers, and competency of practitioners so that they can provide quality health care.

**Title VII & VIII:** Grants established by Public Health Service Act that fund a variety of training programs to improve the geographic distribution, quality, and racial and ethnic diversity of the health care workforce. These programs are administered by the BHP of HRSA. The areas covered by these grants, by title, are:

**Title VII Programs**

- Minority Centers of Excellence
- Health Career Opportunity Program
- Faculty Loan Repayment and Faculty Fellowships
- Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students
- Primary Care Medicine

- General Pediatrics
- General Internal Medicine
- Family Medicine
- Osteopathic Medicine
- Dentistry
- Physician Assistants
- Primary Care Loan
- Area Health Education Centers
- Health Education and Training Centers
- Geriatric Health professions
- Quentin N. Burdick for Rural Interdisciplinary Training
- Allied Health and Other Disciplines
- Health Professions Workforce Information and Analysis
- Public Health Training
- Public Health Traineeships
- Preventive Medicine and Dental Public Health Residencies
- Health Administration Programs
- Health Professional Student Loans
- Loans for Disadvantaged Students

#### Title VIII Programs

- Advanced Nursing Education Grants
- Workforce Diversity Grants
- Nurse Education Loan Repayment and Scholarship Program
- Nurse Education, Practice, and Retention
- Nursing Faculty Loan Program
- Comprehensive Geriatric Education

Continuing with the HHS agencies, we find:

**NIH:** National Institutes of Health; the agency that conducts or, supports with grants, medical research.

**OIG:** Office of the Inspector General, The mission of the Office of Inspector General, as mandated by Public Law 95-452 (as amended), is to protect the integrity of Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) programs, as well as the health and welfare of the beneficiaries of those programs. The OIG's duties are carried out through a nationwide network of audits, investigations, inspections and other mission-related functions performed by OIG components. This is the office from which the requirement for a clinical laboratory compliance plan was issued following the successful prosecution of clinical laboratories for fraud in the 1980's.

**SAMHSA:** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, focuses on providing services that will improve health care for people with or at risk for mental or substance use disorders; publishes guidance on workplace drug testing requirements.

We next turn our attention to the Department of Labor. Labor was formed by Congress in 1913 "to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment." This department is composed of many bureaus, offices and administrations, of which two are pertinent to our discussions:

**BLS:** Bureau of Labor Statistics; the principal fact-finding agency for the federal government, publishing statistics and projections, as well as salaries, work hours etc., on the country's workforce. Information about our profession, its duties, education requirements, census and ten year projection for need are all found on this bureau's web site.

**OSHA:** Occupational Safety and Health Administration overseeing the safety of working conditions in the U.S.

#### The Legislative Branch

The legislative branch of the federal government is the Congress which is divided into two chambers, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Assisting Congress are three institutions, the Library of Congress (LOC), the General Accountability Office (GAO) and the Government Printing Office (GPO).<sup>3</sup>

Each chamber of Congress has a committee structure<sup>4</sup>. The House has at least two committees with jurisdiction over health issues, Energy and Commerce and Ways and Means. The Senate has two committees, Finance and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP). While most of the acronyms associated with Congress come from the legislation passed; there are a few acronyms for Congressional offices and institutions of note:

**CBO:** Congressional Budget Office, an agency that provides the Congress with the objective, timely, nonpartisan analyses needed for economic and budget decisions and with the information and estimates required for the Congressional budget process.

**GAO:** Government Accountability Office, an agency that studies the programs and expenditures of the federal government. Also called the investigative arm of Congress

or the congressional watchdog, GAO is independent and nonpartisan. It studies how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars.

**GPO:** Government Printing Office, established to make information about the work of the federal government available to the general public. Of its myriad of publications, the ones we access to keep up with regulatory and legislative changes are:

**CFR:** Code of Federal Regulations, a collection of 50 titles<sup>8</sup> that codifies all of the permanent rules published in the Federal Register

**CR:** Congressional Record, the official record of the proceedings and debates of Congress that is published daily when Congress is in session.

**FR:** Federal Register, the official publication of any rules, proposed rules, notices, etc. from all of the agencies and organizations of the federal government. This publication is also published daily.

**GSA:** General Services Administration, the purchasing department of the government

**IOM:** Institute of Medicine, a part of the National Academy of Sciences, established by Congress to act as a non-profit, private, non-governmental organization that can provide science-based advice on matters of biomedical science, medicine, and health.

**LOC:** Library of Congress is a resource for information and knowledge that is accessible to Congress and the general public.

**MedPAC:** An independent federal body established by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-33) to advise the U.S. Congress on issues affecting the Medicare program.

**OPHS:** Office of Public Health and Science coordinates 12 programs including the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS).

**USPHS:** one of the U.S. seven uniformed services, comprised of public health professionals dedicated to delivering the Nation's public health promotion and disease prevention programs and advancing public health science.<sup>9</sup>

### Laws Affecting Laboratorians

**BBA '97:** Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (see "Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule" article in this issue for information about this law).

**DRA:** Deficit Reduction Act of 1984 established the clinical laboratory fee schedule.

**HIPAA:** Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act; nicknamed the "Privacy Act"

**MMA 2003:** Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 (see "Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule" article in this issue for information about this law).

**TEFRA 1983:** Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act established the Diagnostics Related Groups (DRG) reimbursement system for inpatients.

### Pending Legislation

**AHRA:** Allied Health Reinvestment Act is legislation that was introduced by the Association for Schools of Allied Health Professions (ASAHP) a number of years back. The language provides incentives for individuals to pursue allied health careers. The legislation does this via programs that would support students interested in allied health careers and the academic institutions that train them. The legislation also assists with faculty development and provides for public service announcements to increase interest in allied health careers. This bill was introduced in the Senate but has never made it to a vote. In addition, there is no companion bill in the House as of the publication of this article.

**MCLFS:** Medicare Clinical Diagnostic Laboratory Fee Schedule Modernization Act of 2008

### Conclusion:

Acronyms are language shortcuts that have permeated every aspect of modern life. The use of acronyms can speed communication and understanding when everyone knows what the acronym means. This article has highlighted some of the many federal government acronyms that you may encounter in your professional career. There are many resources on the White House, Departments, House and Senate web sites that provide additional information and "translations" of



our government's alphabet soup. Knowing these commonly used abbreviations should expedite your understanding of information from and about the federal government.

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