

Celebrating National Medical Laboratory Week

By Dr. Hassan Aziz *

The National Medical Laboratory Week is fast approaching. It is an annual event where laboratorians, nationwide, are recognized for their role in the health care arena. Medical Technology is an unseen profession to many. Historically, medical technologists and laboratory professionals have had limited patient contact and therefore, very little is known about this profession. Medical technologists provide essential clinical information to health care providers and are responsible for assuring reliable results that contribute to the prevention, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment of physiological and pathological conditions. Many laboratory practitioners assist clinicians in correlating test results with patient data and recommend tests and test sequences in light of known clinical considerations. On April 18 -24, the dedication and expertise of medical technologists will be brought out from behind the walls of the lab and into the spotlight with the theme Laboratory Professionals: Working with You for Better Health.

Numerically, laboratory professionals represent the second largest sector among health care workers following nurses. The profession is also rapidly evolving where several billions of dollars are spent each year in over 172,000 clinical laboratories in this country alone. The medical laboratory is a \$101.5 billion dollar business, representing as much as 11¢ of each health care dollar. Laboratory tests are extremely valuable and contribute up to 70% to all medical decisions made by health care providers.

As the American economy rise, medical personnel shortage worsens. Further, the national applicant pools for medical technology and other health care professions are down. Student enrollment has also fallen over the past decade. The Bureau of Labor

Statistics (BLS) of the US Department of Labor reported that the demand for clinical laboratory technologists would exceed the supply of new graduates. It is estimated that there would be 5,300 new positions created in the medical laboratory field per year through the year 2008. An additional 4,000 positions would also need to be filled due to the retirement of the current laboratory workforce. Therefore, 9,300 new laboratorians are needed each year through 2008.

More than one-third of a million laboratory personnel practice in the US today. Baccalaureate level medical technologists comprise the majority of the staffs of clinical laboratories. Medical technologists perform analytic tests in clinical chemistry, microbiology, hematology, immunohematology, and other biomedical sciences. They are graduates of BS programs that include a didactic component of two to four years and a clinical practicum component of one to two years. Another group of laboratory professionals are the medical laboratory technicians. They perform many standardized procedures under the direction of a qualified physician and/or medical technologist. There are two routes for someone to become a technician. The first is the MLT certificate from a vocational or technical college that is usually twelve to fifteen months in length. Alternatively, one can earn an associate degree from a community college. The program usually lasts two years. Other laboratory professionals include phlebotomists, lab assistants, histologic technicians, and cytotechnologists.

Clinical laboratory science offers a great diversity of job opportunities and provides personal satisfaction knowing that laboratorians have a vital role in the diagnosis, treatment, and care of human mankind.

To receive more information about the exciting field of medical technology, please visit the Department of Medical Technology of Armstrong Atlantic State University website at www.medtech.armstrong.edu or call (912) 927-5204 for a program brochure.