

A Day in the Life of a Medical Technologist



LABORATORY PROFESSIONALS
Providing Answers. Guiding Cures.
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My name is Kimberly Yarborough and I have been a Medical Technologist since 1983. Many people do not know what a Med Tech is, so I will explain.

According to the well respected Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, a medical technologist is "A technologist who works in conjunction with pathologists, physicians, and scientists in all general areas of the clinical laboratory. Independent and correlational judgments are made in a wide range of complex procedures. A med tech may teach and supervise laboratory personnel." A technologist was further defined as "an individual specializing in the application of scientific knowledge in solving practical or theoretical problems."

What that really means is after completing a baccalaureate degree with emphasis on science the interested student attends a Medical Technology certification program. The program that I completed and now teach at Carolinas College is 12 months of intense training 8 hours a day, five days a week. Other programs are similar. Upon successful completion of the Medical Technology program a certificate is awarded and the graduate is eligible to take a national registry examination. Only if the graduate passes that exam are they a registered Medical Technologist or Clinical Laboratory Scientist.

As a student, many years ago, I can remember groggily rising at 5:00am to arrive at what was then Charlotte Memorial Hospital by 7:00am. The day's activities varied. Some were filled with hours of nonstop lecture by instructors and frantic note-taking until 2:30. Pathologists lectured from 2:30-3:30. On the days after lectures were completed, mock laboratories were set up in the student lab and procedures were demonstrated and practiced. Most weeks included at least 2 tests, often a graded practical and a test on pathologist's lectures. At home each evening, 1-4 hours were spent rewriting notes, reading textbooks and studying for approaching tests. There was little time left for anything else. But all of the hard work was worth it!

After spending all that time in the classroom and student lab, I finally began training in the clinical laboratory at Charlotte Memorial Hospital. I was assigned to work with either my instructor or an employed Medical Technologist in the lab to learn what went on at the various "benches". The benches are where different types of testing are done within a department. This laboratory is so large that it is departmentalized. That means the Chemistry testing is done in its own lab area by its own employees as well as Hematology, Microbiology, Blood Bank, Immunology, etc. A typical bench in the Hematology department where I was later employed is operating the automated cell counter. This is where the complete blood count (CBC) is performed. Responsibilities on that one bench include performing instrument maintenance and quality control, checking each of the hundreds (approximately 1 per minute) of specimens for proper labeling and integrity, analyzing the samples using the instrument making sure that all went as expected and evaluating the results for further testing or trouble shooting problems.

If everything is perfect, then the results are accepted into the laboratory computer system which then transfers the data to the hospital system. If something is incorrect, then the Med Tech becomes a detective...is the specimen properly labeled or could it be blood from another patient, is it clotted, was it well mixed, was it an instrument error etc.? They may have to call the nurse's station and ask for that patient's nurse to answer their questions about the specimen. Meanwhile more specimens arrive, some are ordered STAT. Calls come in from other nurses and doctors needing results so that patients may get a blood transfusion, chemotherapy or other types of treatment or simply so they can be released to go home! And this is going on at every bench in the lab all at the same time!

It is challenging and rewarding. No two days are alike and the technology is constantly changing. That is why I worked as a "bench tech" for a few years and then became the Hematology. Even

though it is hard work and sometimes stressful I leave each day knowing that all of the things I did ultimately benefited a patient. Either by diagnosing illness, providing direction for treatment or confirming health!

“Apply yourself. Get all the education you can, but then...do something. Don't just stand there, make it happen.”

- Lee Iacocca