

Sharing My Passion



Hrisinko

By Mary Ann Hrisinko, MT(ASCP)

I have been a medical technologist for more than 31 years. Needless to say, medical technology and hematology in particular have been a major part of my life. In 1972, I had no idea that medical technology existed, but I always enjoyed solving puzzles and doing logic problems, so it was only natural for me to gravitate toward mathematics and science courses.

Two popular television shows in the late 1960s and mid-1970s, *Medical Center* and *Marcus Welby, MD*, aroused my interest in medicine (although I must admit so did James Brolin and Chad Everett). Through these television programs I learned of the existence of “the lab” and the inability of physicians to treat a patient without a “lab result.” Lab results were something like a puzzle, and I could solve puzzles. I looked through my college course catalog and stumbled upon the career path of a medical technologist. This sounded much more interesting to me than a career in nursing, so that’s the path I chose.

School Career Days

Two years ago, pathology resident Hillary McElligott, MD, and I attended Career Day at the Eberhardt Elementary School in Chicago. We had no idea what to expect and were amazed by the efforts of this school to introduce its seventh graders to a variety of career paths. We were among lawyers, state attorneys, pediatricians, architects, dentists, and state police officers, to name a few. We each gave a five-minute introduction to our jobs. Then the floor was opened up for questions.

The top two questions for Dr. McElligott and me were: How much do you make and how many hours do you work? We were pleasantly surprised but also stunned, as we were somewhat convinced that nobody from the group would ever want to pursue a career in pathology, especially after hearing about the others.

We were excited when the school asked us to participate in Career Day this year. Our goal this time was to convince the group that a pathologist was a real physician and that a medical technologist did more than draw blood, although I pointed out that a proper blood draw was critical to testing. Dr. McElligott referred to the television program *CSI* and described the pathologist as the “the doctor’s doctor.” It was

only natural that I referred to the medical technologist as “the pathologist’s pathologist.”

Nowadays, most children have had their blood drawn, so they can easily relate to the various colored tubes used for collection. I talked about what the colors meant and what tests could be performed on each. I was still asked how much money I made and how many hours I worked, but this time I stressed that you can’t put a price on saving somebody’s life. For some of the children, that hit home. I actually received some lovely letters from the students.

‘Big Yellow Taxi’

It would be a shame if we let our profession become extinct by not providing support for the medical technology programs in colleges and hospitals. Remember the Joni Mitchell song “Big Yellow Taxi”? Institutions seem intent on “paving paradise” and creating “a parking lot” of laboratory professionals with limited expertise. If the “seasoned” technicians are sent to “a museum,” I guarantee it will cost more than “a dollar and a half just to see ‘em.”

Seasoned technologists are needed in the laboratory to teach newcomers what they missed during their internship. We need to promote ourselves as professionals. Unfortunately, sometimes we are not viewed as part of the medical profession because we lack direct patient contact. That’s a shame, since I cannot think of a patient contact more direct than distinguishing a malignant from a benign process within blood, fluid, or bone marrow of a patient.

I told the students they are our future and any one of them might be the person who develops a test or cure for leukemia or cancer. It brought a tear to my eye when one of the students said that this was the first time anyone ever referred to them as “their future.”

I encourage my fellow technologists to embrace opportunities to promote our profession. We need to ensure that the younger generation will have the opportunities that we had to become registered medical technologists with the support from organizations such as ASCP.

Ms. Hrisinko is Technical Coordinator, Hematology/Bone Marrow, at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago.