What You Need to Know: The Clinical Laboratory Profession

The clinical laboratory profession is an often unknown, if not misunderstood, medical profession. Many believe the laboratory is a place where people go “just to have blood drawn”. The previous statement is true, in that the laboratory encompasses blood drawing, but it is not limited to this one task. Recognition of the laboratory profession and acknowledgment of its many facets often occurs only when there is media coverage of a healthcare crisis, such as an outbreak (does Ebola ring a bell?). However, laboratorians have a hand in patient care, working quietly and diligently behind the scenes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Usually, the work is performed with little to no fanfare. Every year, for one week in the month of April, National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week celebrates the impact of the laboratory on the medical profession. For a better understanding, let’s take a closer look inside this mostly unseen profession.

What is a clinical laboratory scientist (medical technologist)?
A clinical laboratory scientist performs tests on patient samples that provide information to a physician to diagnose or monitor treatment of diseases. Examples of these laboratory tests include identifying sickle cell anemia in a patient, diagnosing strep throat, and providing blood products for transfusion to an accident victim. Some duties that these professionals may encounter on the job include operating highly computerized equipment, correlating test results with a patient’s condition, identifying bacteria and viruses, and last but not least, monitoring the quality of tests.

Educational background of a clinical laboratory scientist
A clinical laboratory technician has completed an associate’s degree program with specific studies pertaining to clinical laboratory science. A clinical laboratory technologist holds a four-year bachelor’s degree in clinical laboratory science. The clinical laboratory science curriculum is more in-depth for a technologist than a technician. The technologist may take additional courses such as biology, microbiology, chemistry, math, statistics, and business management. In most instances, the clinical laboratory curriculum involves a six month to one-year rotation in a hospital setting upon completion. Both the associate and bachelor’s degree must be obtained from a nationally accredited clinical laboratory program. This is a requirement held by many employers during the hiring process. There are also scientists working in the laboratory that hold master’s and doctorate degrees. These advanced degrees may focus on research, healthcare administration, and even education.

Certification vs. Licensure
When a clinical laboratory scientist is certified, it means that they demonstrate the highest level of competency needed to perform the critical responsibilities of the profession. The certification process involves the individual to pass (usually 80%) a national test upon graduation. This test encompasses all material presented during their course of study. In addition to passing the nationally recognized test, some certifying agencies require the professional meet a certain number of hours of continuing education each year. When all the criteria are successfully met,
leaving the profession due to retirement. Along with the well-deserved exit, a void of history and great knowledge is left. Some of the generation Xer’s and millennials are taking advantage of other new opportunities available. The most critical reason for the shortage of skilled laboratory scientists is the lack of awareness of the profession. Many people are unaware that this profession even exists. If you are a detail-oriented, self-motivated individual searching for a career in healthcare, then join the elite group of clinical laboratory scientists. These individuals help to save lives on a daily basis.

Additional Information
- American Society of Clinical Pathology: www.ascp.org
- American Society of Clinical Laboratory Scientists: www.ascls.org
- National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Science: www.naaccls.org

References


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