

## Lab Techs Earn Week of Thanks

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It is a thankless job, but medical technologists can be just as instrumental as doctors when it comes to saving lives.

The behind-the-scenes medical technology professionals are responsible for examining and analyzing body fluids and cells to diagnose disease, determine how patients are responding to treatment, match blood for

transfusions, even do drug screenings. St. Clare Medical Center's lab sees between 200 and 300 samples a day, Lab Director Diane McLaughlin said.

"It's a huge step toward diagnosing a patient and finding out their problems," St. Clare medical technologist Summer Ervin said.

St. Clare's lab, as well as labs all over the country, is celebrating National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week this week, sponsored by the American Society for Clinical Pathology. The week recognizes 265,000 medical laboratory professionals and 15,000 board-certified pathologists, according to the ASCP.

The lab at St. Clare celebrates the week every year, Ervin said. This year Ervin made posters to hang in the hospital's cafeteria letting other hospital employees know just what lab workers do. The lab also will celebrate with games and food, she said.

"We're really trying to recognize everybody who works in the lab, to give praise and promote the occupation," Ervin said.

The week, themed "Laboratory Professionals: Delivering Today's Results for a Healthier Tomorrow," will help other medical professionals know about the critical testing labs perform every day, according to the ASCP.

In medical labs all over the country, medical technologists use traditional microscopes and slides, as well as advanced laboratory equipment to test samples like blood, urine, other body fluids, cells and samples taken from biopsies. In St. Clare's lab, most of the technologists can perform any of the tests and don't specialize in one specific area, Ervin said.

"A small hospital can offer you a little more variety," McLaughlin said.

They perform microbiological tests to identify bacteria and other microorganisms, histology to study tissue, chemistry to study the chemical and hormonal contents of body fluids and hematology to study the components of blood. Some technologists see patients to draw their blood to be tested. Others work with the blood bank, where blood types are matched for patients who need transfusions. In the blood bank, medical technologists work under strict rules, as giving a patient the wrong blood type can be fatal, Ervin said.

The St. Clare lab sees samples from inpatients and outpatients of the hospital, the emergency room, local doctors' offices and nursing homes.



Summer Ervin studies a blood sample through a microscope in the lab at St. Clare Medical Center.

“The doctor will treat that patient based on the results you send out,” said Ervin, who has worked at the St. Clare lab for a year and been a medical technologist for six years.

The field is becoming increasingly automated as technology advances and people expect their results faster, said McLaughlin, who has been with the St. Clare lab for 25 years.

“It’s becoming more automated, but the techs have to use their judgment,” she said.

Technologists must interpret and analyze test results and keep a close eye on the machines to make sure they are working correctly.

“We’re responsible for running many diagnostic tests,” McLaughlin said.

Although the St. Clare lab is fully staffed with 25 employees now, it hasn’t always been that way. In fact, medical technologists are getting more difficult to find, Ervin said.

“You complain about nursing all the time, but it’s worse for labs,” she said. “It’s very unknown. Schools talk about nursing but not about medical technology.”

According to information provided by the lab, there were 6,340 medical technology graduates in 1980, compared to only 1,920 in 2006. Medical technology education programs also have dropped off rapidly, with 638 accredited programs in 1983 and only 222 in 2007.

The average age in the St. Clare lab is in the 40s, McLaughlin said, a testament to the field’s shrinking popularity.

Despite its decline in popularity, the medical technology field has a good outlook. It takes an associate’s degree or certificate from a hospital, vocational or technical school or the military to be a medical technician, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For a medical technologist, it usually takes a bachelor’s degree with a major in medical technology or life science. Most people interested in medical technology are inclined in biology, science and chemistry, and some even use the field to get their pre-med degrees, Ervin said.

The number of job openings in the field is expected to grow, as is the volume of employment for lab workers, with 14 percent growth expected through 2016, faster than average for all occupations, according to the BLS. The growth is due to the increase in the number of laboratory tests needed because of population growth and the development of new types of tests.

For Ervin, the job’s draw comes from how she spends her days in the lab.

“I like the fast-paced critical thinking and troubleshooting involved,” she said.