Beckman Coulter’s Kleinert commands a central strategy

**MLO:** Since Beckman acquired Coulter Corp. in 1997, what major change(s) has taken place?

**Robert Kleinert:** We are able to supply diagnostic laboratories with virtually 100% of all routine blood tests. We now offer our customers a much wider range of systems and tests, from cellular analysis to chemistry, immunoassay, automation, data management, and more.

Among the more exciting things that have taken place within our organization is what is occurring in immunoassay. Last year, we launched the UniCel DxI 800 — a random-access immunoassay system — which can perform up to 400 tests per hour. We add more immunoassay tests yearly to our growing menu. This year, we plan to release a dozen new immunoassay tests, with dozens more scheduled to follow over the next five years. Among the tests we plan to release next year is a new marker to help in the detection and management of sepsis.

We are also making great strides in automation and data-management systems that help labs do more with less. Last year, we launched the LH 1500 Series hematology-automation system, which manages the entire hematology-testing process. This year, we are launching Command Central, a new software and hardware system that will enable laboratory personnel to monitor and control multiple instruments and operations from one computer workstation.

**MLO:** What key trends will drive Beckman Coulter in the next few years?

**Kleinert:** In the United States, and even in other countries, labs are being heavily impacted by the labor shortage. Labor statistics indicate that 9,000 new laboratory practitioners will be needed each year. Most of today’s labs do not have enough people to meet their current workloads, much less meet tomorrow’s. At the same time, labs are being forced to reduce costs. You are also seeing a renewed emphasis by government agencies and accreditation organizations for hospitals to reduce medical errors and improve patient safety. Labs are certainly no exception since they provide up to 80% of the information physicians use to diagnose their patients.

Today’s lab must accommodate a much larger test volume, deliver faster, more accurate test results, and do so at a much lower cost and with less people. All of this is driving labs to look at ways to streamline testing processes toward automation, no longer regarded as a tool solely for the benefit of large reference or hospital laboratories. Robotics is no longer an option; it is an imperative for labs of all sizes.

**MLO:** What are the advantages of Beckman Coulter’s focus on improving laboratory productivity to the laboratorian?

**Kleinert:** One of the unique attributes of Beckman Coulter automation is that our systems are scalable and “open,” enabling labs to connect analyzers from various instrument manufacturers. The other key differentiator of our automation is the ability to automate centrifugation. Automation can help labs have a major impact on patient care by providing fast, consistent test results. Certainly test turnaround time (TAT) plays a key role here. Automating the front-end or back-end processes can have a dramatic improvement on TAT, a key distinguishing factor of a laboratory’s service ability. If the sample tube gets bottlenecked in the pre-analytical process in an instrument with the fastest throughput in the world, that throughput does not do you any good. That is why we concentrate on the processes that can improve TAT, from the time the sample arrives in the lab to the time the test result is posted to a patient’s chart. When you have a smooth testing process, you are able to deliver faster, more consistent test results with minimal variability. That will reduce opportunities for medical errors, improve patient safety, reduce costs, and potentially impact patient length of stay.

**MLO:** What continuing education programs does Beckman Coulter offer that benefit the laboratorian?

**Kleinert:** Offering continuing education to laboratorians through our Symposia program and e-learning initiatives is a value-added service. We have had more than 8,000 people attend our Symposia program since it started five years ago, and hundreds have taken advantage of our free Webinars and e-learning modules on our website at www.beckmancoulter.com/lars. We partner with or sponsor a variety of associations to bring continuing education programs to laboratories.

**MLO:** Aside from automating processes, what other responses to the lab personnel shortage has your company implemented or sponsored?

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Robert Kleinert is vice president of Clinical Diagnostics Commercial Operations-Americas, Beckman Coulter Inc., which he joined in January 2003. Kleinert has approximately 30 years of diagnostics industry experience at Lifesystem International Inc., Dade Behring, Baxter International, and American Hospital Supply Corp.
Executive forecast

Kleinert: Our focus is really on process improvement, not necessarily automating processes — although that is certainly an effective tool. Process improvement is not always about automating processes. Automating bad processes will not necessarily make the situation any better. Sometimes it makes sense to get rid of ineffective processes altogether. In light of the labor shortage, our focus is to help the lab realize process improvements. That could involve streamlining the process or even eliminating it altogether. Sometimes automation helps you do both. Sometimes the solution is just about doing something differently.

Laboratorians need more time to spend on other activities, such as interpreting patient test results. Simply offering instrument systems that require less sample volume can reduce the need on the part of phlebotomists to take additional blood from patients for re-testing, while sophisticated data-management, sample-storage, and mapping systems can aid in reflex testing. Does it benefit laboratorians by freeing up their time? Yes. Does it impact other departments in the hospital? Absolutely. It affects the whole healthcare system, enabling earlier and more accurate diagnoses, more effective treatment, and better patient outcomes, as well as eliminating unnecessary procedures. All of this contributes to reduced hospital length of stay and lower overall costs.

MLO: What programs does Beckman Coulter have in place to meet its customers’ needs? How does the Internet change your customer-service functions?

Kleinert: One example is our PROService remote diagnostics and monitoring service. This service allows us to automatically monitor our instruments 24/7 over the Internet. The system alerts us if the instrument is not performing within certain specifications, so it is proving to be an excellent way for labs to increase instrument uptime. We also use the Internet to allow our customers to resolve instrument issues or problems. A number of self-help tools on our website walk users through a series of questions to help identify and solve instrument issues. Users can also submit support requests and check the status of an existing support request.

MLO: Describe some of your company’s cutting-edge products that are fighting emerging global diseases.

Kleinert: In terms of combating “emerging” diseases, the challenge is that it usually takes a number of years to research and develop an effective product, obtain the required government approvals, and release that product to market. Still, today’s existing lab technology plays a significant role in helping diagnose these types of diseases. Usually, it is not just one test or product that labs rely on. For example, many hospital labs in China, Singapore, Canada, and elsewhere benefited from our chemistry, hematology, and automation systems when they were diagnosing and managing SARS patients.

We are working on several new, innovative products to help combat these and other diseases, like new technology to develop a rapid test for bovine spongiform encephalopathy — or “mad cow” disease. The technology holds promise for testing other prion-based disorders, such as Parkinson’s, Lou Gehrig’s disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), and Alzheimer’s. In the case of AIDS testing, we recently signed an agreement with the Clinton Foundation to provide customized AIDS monitoring and testing to third-world countries.