

Do one thing to promote the lab profession

As we begin the second decade of the 21st century, clinical laboratory testing has never been more important in the diagnosis and treatment of the patients we serve. Prior to considering medical laboratory science (MLS) as a profession, my only inkling of MLS was the phlebotomist and the “Authorized Personnel Only” sign on the door at the end of the hospital corridor, as I suspect is the case for most of the American public — and perhaps even some in the medical community.

Early in my career I was fortunate to work with mentors who imparted the concepts of being a “professional,” and with that came the pledge to always keep the patients first, take responsibility for my own actions, and — just as importantly — support the laboratory profession. Throughout my career, I have noticed four falsehoods that we, as lab professionals, must challenge: 1) doing what we do is easy; 2) anyone can do it; 3) lab work is repetitive, boring, and unexciting; and 4) our efforts make little difference in the long run.

While these myths often come from outside our profession, many of us inside the profession are guilty of some of the following proclamations: “No one understands what I do.” Or “What can I alone do to change anything?” And “What we have done before has never worked, so why bother?” We want to be recognized for our efforts by the public, patients, nurses, physicians, and legislators, but most of us make ourselves invisible. We need to increase our visibility and take on the responsibility of supporting the growth of the lab profession.

This revolution requires a paradigm-shift, and it *must* begin with an individual and collective effort to promote the value of our role in patient care. I challenge all medical laboratory professionals to *do one thing every month* to “provide the face” of the lab profession. Since July 2009 when I began my tenure as president of the American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science (ASCLS), I have been collecting stories shared by members that demonstrate how easy

it is to put this proposal into action.

Christine Hostetter, an education coordinator from Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, took the initiative to alert an organizer of remembrance services for families whose newborns died at the hospital to include the pathology staff. She wrote: “The miracle of birth, with happy and sad outcomes, is one where laboratory professionals serve. Beginning with specimen collection and transportation and then from the pregnancy test, to the delta 450, cell counts, transfusions, and microbiology cultures, to the fetal fibronectin, the fetal lung maturity tests, and more, all the way to sensitive autopsies, laboratory professionals journey with the mothers, their babies, and their families.” She went on to make sure future services will include members of the pathology lab.

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An ASCLS member from Minnesota was surrounded by wedding attendees eagerly listening to her explanation of H1N1 testing. In Kansas, one colleague explained to children at her church that medical lab professionals are people who help strangers when they are sick, which later became part of the sermon to help educate the adults as well. Kyle Riding (MA) was in a car accident, and while talking to the state trooper, discovered the officer’s son was interested in a medical science field, so Kyle gave him information about MLS. Mary Lashinski (AK) discussed with fellow jurors why it takes so long to get results back for some lab tests. Melissa Sholl (SC), Kyle Riding (MA), and Deb Rodahl (MN) answered the oft-proclaimed complaint, “Nurses do not understand us,” by becoming involved in opening up communications with nursing leadership in their institutions to facilitate improved patient care. In

April, ASCLS colleagues in Idaho will be spending National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week (NMLPW) supporting the Idaho Food Bank, with point persons already set in every participating laboratory.

How can you get started? *Do one thing every month* to “provide the face” of the lab profession. Share ideas with colleagues at your local, state, and regional professional society meetings and newsletters. Plan *at least one* NMLPW activity that will take you beyond your facility’s walls, as the ASCLS-NJ colleagues did last April by holding up a NMLPW banner in New York City’s Rockefeller Plaza for the “Today Show.” *Do one thing* to demonstrate your pride in this profession, too.

You may not have your names listed on the roster of ASCLS’s promotion of the profession committee, but I hereby pronounce you all members. You are no longer a behind-the-scenes professional. Share your wisdom with the community. Refuse to be called “a room.” Make clear to legislators that patient care is compromised by the use of untrained, uncertified, unlicensed personnel. Explain how the efforts of skilled, qualified lab professionals can change lives.

A strong, concerted effort toward national visibility is essential if the concerns about the personnel shortage, patient safety, and legislation are ever to be effectively addressed. We need to begin this new decade with a commitment to our profession and its professionals to be recognized, respected, and treasured. Share your “provide the face” stories with me at mclane@udel.edu. □



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