Increasing turnover rates, decreasing morale, and the growing unavailability of qualified, properly trained phlebotomists challenge today’s laboratories. In response, the Medical Center of Central Georgia in Macon created a unique training program that provides the necessary instruction for anyone with an interest to become a qualified, skilled phlebotomist trained in all blood-collection techniques for any patient population and capable of immediately filling vacant positions.

A proactive approach
Solving the staffing crisis in the phlebotomy department involved establishing an innovative, unique, and comprehensive phlebotomy-training program, incorporating clinical externship with traditional didactic instruction in a 16-week program. Students at the Medical Center of Central Georgia do not pay tuition; they are hired as full-time temporary employees. Student trainees receive a total of 115 hours of classroom instruction and 475 hours of clinical experience. Classroom instruction includes phlebotomy techniques, medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, phlebotomy history, current medical/legal issues, professionalism, and work ethics. They are given a national certification exam at the conclusion of training. Utilizing a student work program, the selection, education, and technical training processes are controlled by the laboratory as opposed to utilizing off-site academic institutions.

The program started with five students; because it was so successful, the class number was increased to 10 per class. Of the 73 students hired, approximately 80% completed the program, with 90% passing the certification exam. The lab has hired 90% of the graduates, and 8% were hired by other hospital departments. A total of 60% of the graduates are still at the Medical Center, demonstrating their loyalty and the positive impact this training program has made on the turnover rate, which has plummeted from nearly 57% to approximately 20%.

Expanding the program’s scope
The program was so successful that the position of phlebotomy instructor became full-time teaching with availability to assist in other training responsibilities. In addition to the role of director/instructor for the school, the educator also provides specific continuing-education opportunities for the phlebotomy department, individual reteaching opportunities, and in-services for nursing personnel.

This attention to education has assisted the hospital in improving specimen quality and safe collection practices from both the laboratory and nursing. The phlebotomy instructor conducts monthly in-service training for Emergency Room personnel, which has led to a decrease in unacceptable specimens, especially due to clotting and hemolysis.

The educator also provides one-hour quality annual appraisal of each phlebotomy team member — who all must complete an annual two-part competency assessment, including a practical demonstration of technical skills and a written exam covering phlebotomy.
Putting together the pieces

The phlebotomy-school curriculum covers all academic topics as well as technical and safety procedures. All types of blood-collection techniques from venipuncture with evacuated and non-evacuated systems to finger sticks and heel sticks are included in the program. A major pitfall of some programs is to emphasize only one method of collection. Many phlebotomists then become dependent on that one method and are unable to adapt to the variety of available equipment needed to obtain blood from diverse patient populations.

When the Medical Center chose a textbook for its program, the staff looked for the latest edition that covered as many of the curriculum topics as possible and followed sound phlebotomy techniques per CLSI standards. The clinical component includes training the staff to mentor the students. This becomes easier with each graduating class. For example, 53% of the Medical Center staff now includes former graduates who can share what they have learned with new students.

During the clinical experience, students learn a new skill each week in a simulated lab experience — first learning on the artificial arm and then practicing on each other. There are 11 formal simulated lab classes that teach all blood-collection techniques, giving students skills they gradually build upon during the clinical component.

A syllabus should be developed to ensure that the class stays on track and knows when to expect homework, tests, and quizzes. The student handbook should spell out the program outline and objectives, grade scale, attendance, behavioral and dress-code expectations.

Medical Center students’ grades are determined by averaging clinicals, tests, quizzes, and the final exam, each counting for one fourth of the final grade. The final exam consists of two parts: a practical (sticking the artificial arm, shown in the photo), and 250 questions requiring written answers. When considering which certification agency to use for a phlebotomy-education program, determine each agency’s requirements for certification and renewal. Also determine if CEUs are required for certification renewal, as well as documented puncture requirements for certification. Decide whether a practical should be part of the exam process and consider how all of these factors will affect the school’s requirements for formal instruction and clinical hours.

Justifying the creation of a program

If it is necessary to justify creating a phlebotomy-education program, consider the following factors, which the Medical Center’s phlebotomy school was able to show its administrators:

- current and former turnover rates: 90% of graduates were retained as lab employees and the turnover rate dropped from 57% to 20%;
- employee retention in other departments: 8% of graduates were hired for departments other than the lab; and
- training experienced vs. inexperienced phlebotomists: six-week’s vs. 18-week’s training, respectively.

Working for the future

The importance of quality training cannot be stressed enough. Current trends in phlebotomy are centralization of phlebotomy teams with specialized skills, recognition of the need for legislation requiring minimum training standards, and the certification of phlebotomists as a regulated profession. An in-house phlebotomy-training program provides qualified, well-educated phlebotomists, decreases turnover, and raises department morale. The Medical Centers’ phlebotomy school is a proactive model of how any hospital can create a phlebotomy team that is knowledgeable, experienced, and certified.

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