

THE HEALTHCARE IDENTITY CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

What image is the word “healthcare” likely to conjure in the mind of the average American? Possibly a nurse dressed in medical scrubs prepping a syringe for injection, or a team of doctors wheeling a surgical patient into an operating room. Certainly the words “nurse” and “doctor” are likely to inspire thoughts such as this, seeing as how these are such clearly defined identities. However, what images is the phrase “Medical Technologist” associated with? This strange title may be associated with anything from a Medical Equipment Repairman to an Information Technology Specialist. Would it be surprise, then, that the professional field of Medical Technology is grappling with a devastating shortage?

WHAT IS A MEDICAL TECHNOLOGIST



Medical Technologists are the people in hospital laboratories who analyze blood and body fluids to help doctors diagnose and treat disease. Using sophisticated Clinical Analyzers, they provide valuable diagnostic information that makes up a large portion of each patient’s vital medical record. As the slogan goes, America’s Health depends on its laboratories. The field of Medical Technology is vital in the patient care process and its need for personnel needs to be recognized on every level; especially that of education.

Like nursing, lab staffing is cyclical, and we have gone from too many employees to not enough in a very short time. Health Week reported on Oct 12, 1987, that laboratory experts across the country say we face a critical shortage of technical personnel. This shortage will worsen as more lab education programs close and test volume keeps climbing.

There is no absolute documentation of the shortage or the reasons

for it. But informal surveys of laboratory managers and educators across the country indicate it is a definite trend. Numerous job openings are advertised in cities that had not experienced shortages for years. Hospital and university-based education programs, boasting a nearly unlimited selection of students in the past, have much smaller groups to interview. They also report the quality of applicants has declined [Barros 1].

The personnel shortage in the field of Medical Technology is astounding. Most of the work force is made up of baby boomers; people from the ages of 55-65. With patient care becoming increasingly more complicated, this is clearly an issue. America needs to address the issue of a growing need for patient care in the face of a healthcare personnel shortage and do everything possible to recruit new workers. It isn't only Medical Technologists who are suffering.

PERSONNEL RECRUITMENT AS A VISUAL ART



Nurses have similar obstacles to overcome. A national nursing shortage could prove to be just as, if not more devastating than the shortage facing the field of Medical Technology. For the most part, the Nursing workforce as well is aging, and staff numbers seem to be dwindling, and, unlike Medical Technologists, Nurses cannot rely on the implementation of sophisticated automatic analyzers to carry some of their workload. However, regardless of how severe the Nursing shortage may be, Nurses have an even more powerful tool available to them that Medical Technologists do not; a clearly defined image. Certainly, the fact that the term "Medical Technologist" is not clearly defined is having at least some effect on its work force.

Images are obviously effective in our highly visual society. Advertisements bombard consumers from televisions, billboards, and magazine covers. Technology has paved the way to unbelievable power for images and beneficial and detrimental side effects alike have resulted from the development of this ever-developing brave new visual world. Among the most common complaints are that younger generations growing up surrounded by such visual media are "brainwashed" to only look at things in a visual manner. However, on the flipside, younger generations seem to be learning faster because of the availability of images as sophisticated teaching tools.

VISUALIZE MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY



Jeff Widener / API

Television alone broadcasts images that are understood throughout the entire world by people who speak many different languages. Some single images are remembered historically even though the events leading up to them or the facts surrounding them may not be. Who could forget the incident of the lone protester in Tiananmen Square in 1989? Its image will forever be burned into the collective memory of society [Lester 2]. There is no denying that images are effective, so why not start a campaign to Visualize Medical Technology?

It is this exact marketing tactic that is working for Nursing right now. The website discovernursing.com is actively recruiting new nurses every day, providing interested soon-to-be-students with the information they need to pursue the career that they want. If marketing can work in this way, the field of Medical Technology needs to be marketed as well. Future Medical Technologists need the facts and expectations of potential employees need to be clear. The fact that they are not is nothing but a hindrance to personnel numbers.

Everyone has a theory about why all this has happened. Basic problems such as low salaries, high stress, and lack of status and recognition are cited. These problems have always existed, but perhaps some of the shortage is due to women finding better job opportunities in other fields. AIDS is cited as a new force deterring young people from lab careers. That would also apply to many other health professions, however, but not much has been written about shortages in these professions, except for nursing.

I believe there are other reasons why more people are leaving and fewer entering medical technology. Clinical laboratory students graduate with high expectations of what their jobs will be like. When they start working, however, they find things very different.

Very often they do not feel their skills and knowledge are being used appropriately. They grow frustrated and bored. Some find that the techniques and skills gained during the clinical phase of their education are already obsolete in their first workplace. Because of existing political and professional conflicts, they may find they do not receive the recognition status, and respect they had been taught to believe was theirs as laboratorians [Barros 1].

PROBLEMS

- Over-qualification
- Obsolete Education
- Political and Professional Conflict
- Job Expectations Unclear
- AIDS Scare
- Low Salaries
- High Stress
- Lack of Status
- Better Opportunities Elsewhere

FIGURE 1

CONCLUSION



Laboratorian – how often is that phrase even used? It sounds like a phrase that would be used to refer to a lab librarian, rather than a Medical Technologist. It has even been recognized in recent years that the term, “Medical Technologist” is fairly vague, and title of, “Laboratory Scientist” is slowly making its way into the workplace. The solution is simple. The Medical Technology Identity Crisis must be solved.

If television can broadcast shows about Forensic Laboratory Scientists that produce solid images of labcoat and goggles-wearing “lab-dudes” and pack university criminal justice programs around the country, why can’t the media be

used to the advantage of the Medical Laboratory Scientist/Medical Technologist personnel shortage?

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