Q & A

Coming Back to the Laboratory

I am a board-certified medical technologist who left the laboratory to pursue another profession for several years. I would like to return to the laboratory. How can I prepare for this? Is recertification necessary? Is significant retraining required?

Dr Holter responds: A medical technologist’s success in reentering the field of laboratory medicine depends on the following:

1. The number of years she or he has been out of the field
2. Previous work experience
3. Membership in professional organizations
4. Involvement in the profession and number of continuing education credits earned during the absence from the field

The thought of reentering the clinical laboratory can be intimidating. Remember, however, that many of the principles underlying procedures and instruments in today’s laboratory have not changed. Many of the concepts you learned on the job and through education will be relevant when you return. Spectrophotometry remains the underlying principle for most chemistry instruments. Blood cells do not change. The blood bank performs crossmatches and antibody panels. Although nomenclature and instruments used in microbiology have changed, bacteria still are identified by observing carbohydrate reactions and growth on different types of media.

Immunology and virology have changed the most during the past five to ten years. Some procedures in immunology still are based on familiar reactions, such as latex agglutination. Many other procedures and techniques are new, such as flow cytometry and tissue transplantation. Virology uses cell cultures rather than the typical microbiology media for identification. If you intend to work in a small or rural community hospital, you probably will not need to know this field. Generally, such hospitals do not perform specialized tests, such as cell cultures or flow cytometry.

Any laboratorian who begins work in a new laboratory will need some retraining at that particular facility. No matter how experienced you are, you may never have worked with a particular technique, procedure, or instrument.

The trend toward specialization has diminished. Most hospitals seek medical technologists who can work in all areas of the laboratory.

If you’re nervous about reentering the field, remember that the basics of many instruments and procedures have not changed.

Tissue transplantation laboratories and some laboratory sections require specialized knowledge, such as in immunology, virology, mycology, and specialized areas in hematology, chemistry, immunohematology, and blood banking.

Absent for Two to Five Years

If you have worked in the field in the last two to five years, you should have little difficulty in reentering the profession. To prepare for reentry, review materials, such as recent journal articles, textbooks, and procedure manuals, for the specialties you wish to reenter. You may find new tools in the laboratory, but the underlying principles of

Responding to this month’s question are Jean Holter, EdD, MT(ASCP), professor and program director of the medical technology program at the School of Medicine at West Virginia University, Morgantown; and Lynn Little, PhD, MT(ASCP), chair of the department of medical laboratory sciences and director of the medical technology program at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.
new instruments will be familiar—just packaged differently. For example, some cell counters in hematology now use a hydrodynamic focusing principle with a laser beam. The cells are identified, however, using the principles of a manual differential (i.e., determining the presence of granules, cell size, characteristics of the nucleus). The reading of the reagent strip for urinalysis may be automated, but the interpretation of the tests remains the same.

Away From the Lab for More Than Five Years
If more than five years have elapsed since you worked in the laboratory or if you worked in the laboratory for two years or less, you may need a refresher program. These programs vary in length, cost, and approach. Some can be tailored to meet the needs of the individual. Others review all areas of the clinical laboratory (see “Refresher Programs”).

Carefully consider whether a refresher program meets your needs. Determine whether a program’s ratio of “hands-on” experience to theoretical emphasis meets your needs. If you are familiar with the latest instruments and procedures because you’ve participated in continuing education programs, you may need only a “hands-on” program. If you are unfamiliar with new concepts, a program that involves theory and practical experience would be more suitable for you.

Certification and Licensure
If you are certified by the ASCP Board of Registry, you have earned a credential you will carry with you for life. Call the Board of Registry at (800) 621-4142 or (312) 738-1336, ext 440, to renew your registration and receive benefits. These include a subscription to Laboratory Medicine, a valuable source of information to update your knowledge of the field.

Your state’s regulations regarding licensure may have changed since you last worked in the laboratory. California, Florida, and Tennessee require medical technologists to pass a state examination and to participate in continuing education. Other states require national certification, participation in continuing education, or both to maintain licensure. Ask laboratory professionals in your area about this issue. For more information, consult the article, “Keys to Understanding State Licensure,” published in the April 1995 issue of Laboratory Medicine (1995; 26:238–239).

Stay Confident
Perhaps the greatest difficulty returning technologists face is that their confidence is shaken—because automation has increased in the laboratory or because their manual dexterity is not as great as it once was. Remember that laboratory skills no longer emphasize the ability to pipette as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, other devices make pipetting easier. Some returning technologists feel that they cannot learn new techniques and procedures. Remember that you have a vast amount of knowledge and experience—the building blocks are still within you. The students who complete our refresher program are hardworking and dedicated. They are among the best students in our school.

Dr Little responds: Technologists seeking to reenter the field should realize that the rules of the laboratory market are changing rapidly. Clinical laboratories are in the process of reengineering to meet the demands of health care reform under the cost constraints of managed care. To succeed, you will need updated skills, flexibility, and a positive attitude.

Like established technologists, returning technologists must realize that potential employers are under pressure to succeed as a business, not as a service. Laboratories and technologists unable to become more efficient and productive probably will not succeed in this new competitive environment.

But the outlook is not all bleak. Whether you raised children or sold laboratory equipment during your hiatus, you have developed maturity and skills that can be applied to reentering the laboratory market. California, Florida, and Tennessee require medical technologists to pass a state examination and to participate in continuing education. Other states require national certification, participation in continuing education, or both to maintain licensure. Ask laboratory professionals in your area about this issue.
Refresher Programs

The following institutions offer retraining opportunities for medical laboratory professionals. Most commonly, returning technologists are integrated into the regular medical technology programs. This list is not comprehensive, so you may wish to contact other medical technology programs in your area to find out whether they welcome technologists who want to brush up on their skills.

**California**
San Francisco State University
Center for Advanced Medical Technology
Medical Technology Reentry Program
1600 Holloway, Science Rm 211
San Francisco, CA 94132
Mary Ellen Hermann, MS, MT(ASCP)
(415) 338-2332

**Connecticut**
Bridgeport Hospital
School of Medical Technology
267 Grant St
Bridgeport, CT 06610
Rose Schakleford, MT(ASCP)SH
(203) 384-3108

**Ohio**
School of Medical Technology
University Hospital of Cleveland
11100 Euclid Ave
Cleveland, OH 44106
Juanita Wingenfeld, MS, MT(ASCP)
(216) 844-1812

**Texas**
University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Southwestern Allied Health Science School
Medical Technology Program
5323 Harry Hines Blvd
Dallas, TX 75235-8878
Lynn M. Little, PhD, MT(ASCP)
(214) 648-1780
llittle@mednet.swmed.edu

**West Virginia**
West Virginia University Medical Center
Medical Technology Program
2138 Basic Science Bldg
Morgantown, WV 26506
Jean Holter, EdD, MT(ASCP)
(304) 293-4604

You need to network—to help you decide whether a laboratory career is still right for you, to learn what skills and credentials laboratories require of medical technologists, and to identify job opportunities in your area.

Networking Is Key
You do not need to complete formal training to reenter the field. You need to network—to meet laboratory professionals in your area, to help you decide whether a laboratory career is still the right choice for you, to learn what skills and credentials laboratories require of their technologists, and to identify job opportunities.

Years ago, volunteering in the laboratory was one way for technologists to reenter the field. Returning technologists developed confidence and exercised rusty skills, while laboratories benefited from their work. Many laboratory managers offered employment to hardworking volunteers. Today, liability and confidentiality policies prevent many hospitals from permitting volunteers in their laboratories. When you network, find out whether a laboratory might allow you to work as a volunteer.

Keep Your Chin Up
Devote about a year to retrain yourself and to find a job. As always, your fate is in your hands. Get involved in your professional association at the state or local level. Look for role models. Seek guidance from technologists working in the laboratory, especially those who have reentered the field. How did they do it? Follow their example. Perhaps they can set up appointments with their laboratory manager for you. With confidence, imagination, and hard work, you will find your way back to the exciting, rewarding, and ever-changing world of laboratory science.