
Quality Qorner

February is National Heart Month— What's At the Heart of Your Laboratory?

Hearts galore in February. Heart-shaped necklaces and those cute little heart candies with sayings printed on them. Chocolate hearts—but then also admonishments from the American Heart Association to take care of your heart's health. And don't forget all the heart-felt love for our sweet-hearts!

So...what's at the heart of your laboratory?

Is the heart of your laboratory its customers? You know—the people we serve. And just who is that? Well, there are the *external* customers—the patients from whom we collect samples, the nurses whom we call with alert value results, and the physicians for whom we provide results and reports. Then there are the *internal* customers—hey, that's us! We serve each other by making sure that what we do is done right for the next person so that he or she can do what they do right...and so on down the line so it all comes out right in the end. Right? And if the customers aren't happy, then no one's happy! So if you said that customers are the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory your information system? It might be. It holds all the patient demographic information, the test results, and the programs that make it all work together. When it's connected via interface to the hospital or larger organization's information system, we have a much larger circulation of information. However, when the computer's heart skips a beat, we're down, and when it flatlines, we're back to the stone ages of paper requisitions and worksheets. So if you said that the information system is the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory its analyzers and equipment? Perhaps. Little testing can be done without centrifuges and incubators and automated analyzers. There's no blood transfusion without blood refrigerators and freezers. There's no mixing and measuring without clean glassware, or media without an autoclave. If the analyzers aren't functioning properly, we're relegated to back-up methods. If the centrifuges are broken, sample separation can be impossible. If we can't keep the blood cold and the platelets warm, patients can't have this life-saving therapy. So if you said that equipment is the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory the physical facility and workstations? Possibly. Laboratory life is uncomfortable when we're tripping over each other for lack of space. Time and effort are wasted if the movement of work crisscrosses all over the place. Our backs hurt and our legs ache if our workstations aren't ergonomically designed for comfortable standing, bending, or sitting. And if you ever needed a chemical shower or eyewash station, you'd be glad it was there...and functioning properly. So if you said the physical facility itself is the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory its documents and records? Why not? They are what the inspectors, surveyors, assessors, and investigators spend hours poring over during your laboratory's frequent inspections, surveys, assessments, and CLIA "visits." The documents—aka, policies, processes, and procedures—communicate to staff what is done, how it happens, and how to do it. And deficiencies are all too frequently handed out when your documents are not complete or current! As for records—well, after all, that's an important part of what we do—generate records of sample collections, test results, method performance checks, calibrations, and maintenance to prove the accuracy and reliability of our work. So if you said that documents and records are the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory the work itself? Likely so. It is, after all, what we do when we come to work everyday. Some laboratory staff members work in preanalytic processes such as sample collection, receiving, and accessioning. Others perform analyses and examinations. Still others transcribe, print, and distribute reports. For the patient to benefit from all our efforts, the right work needs to be done right the first time, every time. (Can you honestly say that *always* happens in your laboratory?) So if you said that the work itself is the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of the laboratory its top management—that is, your medical and administrative directors, managers, and supervisors? It's worth considering. Their responsibility is to provide your laboratory's staff with the facility, people, equipment, materials, processes, procedures, and training to correctly and accurately transform a physician's order for a test into results used in diagnosing and treating patients. If they don't do their jobs, it's awfully hard for you to do your job—and do it right the first time. Right? So if you said that your

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laboratory's management is the heart of the laboratory, you'd be right.

Is the heart of your laboratory its people? You'd like to think so. No matter how many computers or analyzers or sample-handling robots there are in your laboratory, nothing happens without your laboratory's people. So if you said that people were the heart of your laboratory, you'd be right.

It looks like your laboratory has a lot of hearts. But any normal living organism has only one heart. So what's the one true heart of the laboratory? The one unifying concept that connects all these other hearts together? I'd like to offer this simple suggestion. I think it's quality. *Quality is—and needs to be—the heart of all your laboratory's activities.* So, no matter how many computers or analyzers or sample-handling robots you have now or in the future, only people can bring the unifying concept of quality from inside their hearts to ensure the quality of all your laboratory's activities.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"Look beneath the surface; let not the several quality of a thing nor its worth escape thee." Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Contact Us

If you have a quality question, or an idea for the *Quality Qorner*, please e-mail me at: Imberte@worldnet.att.net.