

Quality Qorner

Growing Your Laboratory's Quality Manager

Take a look at the alphabet soup under my name in the picture below. I get teased a lot about having more letters after my name than *in* my name. When someone once asked my father what I did for a living, I overheard his reply that he really didn't know what I did except that I flew around and talked a lot—which, if you know me, is absolutely true—albeit a really dumbed-down version of an action-packed, quarter-century-plus professional career. It's humbling (and healthy) to realize that the letters mean little, if anything, outside my profession. You might ask, "Which profession is that?" considering that my letters contain acronyms of 2 certification organizations. Am I a medical technologist or... what exactly is a CQA and a CQMgr?

The 1999 Institute of Medicine Report, "To Err is Human: Building A Safer Health System" highlighted an urgent need to improve quality in health care services to patients. The report suggested that the tools and techniques for quality improvement and quality management that are being used successfully in business and industry today could be used in health care to reduce or eliminate medication errors, wrong-site surgery, patient misidentification, and other quality problems that prevent health care professionals from "doing the right thing right the first time."

"Quality," as we once learned in our professional training, has evolved above and beyond simple method QC into a much bigger body of knowledge. This also means that laboratory professionals who understand and can apply the wider range of quality knowledge and activities are a valuable laboratory resource. The 2003 publication of an international standard for medical laboratories—*ISO 15189: Medical Laboratories – Particular requirements for quality and competence*—brought new terms into the medical laboratory lexicon with the requirement that laboratory management "appoints a **quality manager** (however named) with delegated responsibility and authority to oversee compliance with the requirements of the **quality management system**." Although a quality manager and a quality management system (QMS) are not yet required of United States laboratories, those that understand the patient safety improvements and competitive advantages of implementing a laboratory quality management system will reap significant benefits.

Where does a laboratory find a laboratory professional who is also a quality manager and who understands and can implement a quality management system? There are not that many of us out there, so hiring one will be a challenge. However, someone in your own laboratory may have an interest in the professional development opportunity of learning more about quality principles and tools.

The American Society for Quality (ASQ) is a professional organization, established in 1948, that offers certifications in various areas of quality, some of which have definite application in a laboratory setting. Here are descriptions of a few certifications for which experienced laboratory professionals are often qualified.

The **Certified Quality Improvement Associate (CQIA)** is a basic certification for an individual who has a basic knowledge of quality tools and their uses and is involved in quality improvement projects, but does not necessarily come from a traditional quality area (such as engineering or manufacturing quality control). Two years of general work experience or an associate degree are minimum requirements.

The **Certified Quality Auditor (CQA)** is a more advanced certification for a professional who understands auditing standards and principles, and the auditing techniques of examining, questioning, evaluating, and reporting, to determine the adequacies and deficiencies of a QMS. The CQA analyzes all elements of a QMS and judges its degree of adherence to established criteria. Qualifications include 8 years of on-the-job experience in 1 or more areas of the auditing body of knowledge, with at least 3 years in a decision-making position, defined as the authority to define, execute, or control projects and processes and to be responsible for the outcome; this may or may not include management or supervisory positions. Many blood bank technologists have become CQA-certified to ensure that AABB accreditation requirements for their facility's QMS are being met. The JCAHO "tracer" methodology is based on process auditing principles—an excellent way for laboratories to self-monitor process performance.

The **Certified Manager of Quality/Organizational Excellence (CMQ/OE)** (Note: replaces the CQMgr in March 2006) is an advanced certification for professionals who lead and champion process improvement initiatives by using knowledge management tools and techniques to support strategic planning and deployment initiatives and in resolving organizational challenges. Ten years on-the-job experience in 1 or more areas of the CMQ/OE body of knowledge are required, with at least 5 years in a decision making position, as described above. Part of the 10-year experience requirement can be waived for those with associate, bachelor, or master's degrees.

More information about the ASQ, its Healthcare Division, and these certification examinations (among others), can be found on the website: www.ASQ.org. You can also call ASQ in Milwaukee at 800.248.1946 to ask for certification packets on the examinations described above and also their excellent publications catalog. It is a *free* way to get the body of knowledge outlines and find the resources to help you learn more about quality management.

Certification by examination is not actually necessary for a laboratory quality manager if you just want to learn and apply quality principles and concepts in your laboratory. But it is a great way to be awarded with peer recognition for proficiency in, and comprehension of, a particular area of the quality body of knowledge...and to collect more letters after your name! I was once introduced as "Luci Berte, M-I-C---K-E-Y---and all that other stuff."

This Month's Quality Quote:

"In a time of drastic change it is the learners who will inherit the future. The learned find themselves equipped to only live in a world that no longer exists." — Eric Hoffer

Lucia Berte is a quality systems consultant who believes in lifelong learning. Would you like to hear about the CPHQ?



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