



Medical Laboratory Workers

Events during the 2009 changeover of community laboratory contracts in Auckland highlighted the vital role that medical laboratory science plays in a safe and efficient health system - in particular, the need for a qualified and experienced medical laboratory workforce that is able to produce accurate results in a timely manner.

Once our phlebotomists have taken your blood, what then? What goes on in a modern medical laboratory, open 24/7? Read on. We will explain what happens and who does the work.

Along with Pathologists, we are the registered health professionals who run the laboratories, test, interpret and report the laboratory results. We are trained to identify disease and abnormalities through studying blood, tissue and other body samples. Unlike doctors and nurses, we work 'behind the scenes', but we are an integral part of the health workforce and our work is vital to the patient's treatment. Over 90% of doctors' treatment requires laboratory input, to aid or confirm diagnosis and to monitor drug levels or disease progression.

We are highly regarded and sought after worldwide. Unfortunately, the current situation in New Zealand, of contracting out of laboratory services, is having a catastrophic effect on our profession. Our older colleagues are leaving, and younger science students are choosing other careers. Ours is the only professional health science degree where the number of places in the university is greater than the number of students applying.



Medical Laboratory science is a bit like detective work. We look for answers to the disease "puzzle", to help doctors diagnose and treat their patients – Are these cells abnormal? What do these blood cells tell us about this person's health? How does it fit in with their other symptoms? How much of drug 'x' is in this person's blood? Is it working effectively? What bug is making this person sick?

Our job has a high level of responsibility. We often have to make important decisions under pressure. Emergencies can occur at any time, day or night, so we have to prioritize and take the initiative, often without much back-up. If the doctor needs to know the answer, we have to deliver. Sometimes this means working through the night providing results while a patient fights for their life in another part of the hospital or a surgeon waits, mid-operation, for our phone call.

We develop, adapt and apply scientific methods of analysis and high standards of quality assurance to our work. We have to understand the method and theory behind complicated, technical and automated equipment, as well as develop the skills to identify and interpret abnormalities seen under the microscope, or by other methods of testing.

