

# Marquette Tribune Online

## News Article

### Few graduates create clinical lab worker shortage

American Society for Clinical Pathology estimates 40,000 jobs vacant nationwide

By [Sarah Milnar](#)



Marquette clinical laboratory students in Schroeder Health Complex should have no problem finding jobs post-graduation because of thousands of job openings in the field... (Credit: [Lauren Stoxen](#))

- This week is National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week
- Hospitals experience shortage of clinical laboratory scientists who do vital 'behind the scenes' work
- By 2012, approximately 13,800 medical laboratory professionals will be needed every year to fill vacant positions
- Marquette will graduate 10 students with clinical lab science degrees this May

When a child comes to see the doctor with a fever and swollen lymph nodes, the clinician may not immediately think leukemia.

Clinicians take a blood sample and send it off to a lab. Abnormalities with the child's blood count lead to further testing, said Linda Milson, chair of Marquette's Clinical Laboratory Science Department, as she pointed out a cluster of excess white blood cells stained a deep shade of fuchsia under a microscope.

The child has leukemia, she said.

"And that decision cannot be made by looking at the patient and doing a physical exam," Milson said. "It has to be confirmed by laboratory diagnostic testing."

By 2012, approximately 13,800 medical laboratory professionals will be needed every year to fill vacant positions, according to U.S. Department of Labor projections. The American Society for Clinical Pathology estimates as many as 40,000 currently unfilled clinical laboratory jobs nationwide as fewer than 5,000 students graduate from the program each year.

There has been a severe shortage of clinical laboratory scientists since 2000 because people just don't know about the profession, Milson said.

From the seven clinical lab science programs offered at Wisconsin universities, 123 students will graduate in May 2008, she said. Marquette will graduate 10 students with such degrees.

Linda Laatsch, an associate professor of clinical laboratory science, said everyone sees the nurse, the doctor and the physical therapist. Most people think the tests they do are sent off to "some magical place" and the diagnosis mysteriously appears, she said.

"What they don't tell you is the reason the doctor had the diagnosis is because of all the results that came back from the laboratory," Laatsch said. "We are the people who are behind the scenes."

Laatsch estimated that 70 or 80 percent of medical diagnoses rely on laboratory testing.

"If 70 to 80 percent of diagnosis depends on laboratory testing and that laboratory testing is incorrect, doctors are going to be incorrectly diagnosing and incorrectly treating," Laatsch said.

Effects thereafter can lead to more severe disease or even death, she said.

"The worst possible scenario is that they're going to start hiring so many on-the-job trained people, that they're not going to have people in the laboratory that really know what needs to be done," Laatsch said.

Laatsch said there's more to the profession than running a test or pushing a button.

"It's a complex process of making sure that the results you get are going to be at least as good, if not better, than the methodology you were using previously," she said.

April Harkins, also an associate professor of clinical laboratory science, said the shortage could be very dangerous for patients, especially those nearing retirement.

The over-65 population will nearly triple by 2030 as baby boomers age, according to Wisconsin's Health Care Workforce Report for 2007. Two new clinical laboratory scientists enter the field for every seven facing retirement, according to statistics compiled by LabsAreVital.com, an online resource for laboratory professionals.

Casey Clobes, a sophomore majoring in clinical laboratory sciences, said such numbers mean clinics will not have enough people to run tests, putting patients in jeopardy.

"These numbers are really lopsided," she said. "And that's really bad because that means these hospitals are going to be really backed up."

But Clobes said it's normal for people not to know a lot about clinical laboratory science. She said she didn't know about the field coming in and discovered it while paging through Marquette's Course Guide.

"It's kind of like a mystery puzzle type thing where you have to piece together all the information and bring it together for a final diagnosis," Clobes said. "There's more to it than what you see."

Clobes said the shortage motivates her.

"It's not a very glorious job, but someone has to do it and it helps save lives," she said. "So I'll be willing to do that."

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