

LAB TECHS

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other jobs. Mr. Shelfer's colleague, Dr. Syeda Mamoon, teaches an anatomy and physiology course at Rasmussen. Students in the two-year MLT program will need her class, along with courses in chemistry, hematology and others.

"The problem is most people don't know about (MLTs)," she said.

Mr. Shelfer said he went into the field because his aunt worked in a medical laboratory.

"I think most people don't know about it unless they have a family member in the profession," he said.

Bio-tech in Lee may create jobs

Laboratory technicians could potentially work in the type of private-industry labs used by bio-tech and life science firms that the Lee County Economic Development Office last year set aside \$25 million to attract. Already, \$1.7 million has been used to draw a company. Jim Moore, head of the Lee County Economic Development Office, said it will bring 350 jobs in two years, although many of those could be higher paying positions that require more education.

Madden Research Loop, a planned research development at Southwest Florida International Airport, is talking with 12 companies interested in expanding their operations and workforce in Lee County, said Steve Brown, vice president of development for Madden. He couldn't reveal the tenants who will move into the park once it's complete because they are publicly traded, but said eight of the 12 are bio-tech firms.

"There's a lot of crossover between hospital and health care positions and the kinds of clients our tenants will bring to the area," he said. "(MLT) positions can be the precursors, if they ever want to go on to get their full bachelors' or masters' or a PhD. The research park will benefit from having those people readily available."

The Lee Memorial Health System employs 120 medical lab techs, has two job openings and expects to need five to 10 MLTs per year due to turnover and retirement.

Education means higher quality

Lab workers will play a large role in the quality of a growing health care system, the Lewin Group report says. If schools don't attract a new wave of students to work in labs, it concludes, the shortage might be filled with people who are less qualified.

And since lab results make up at least 70 percent of the records doctors use to make diagnoses, it could have an impact

on the quality of health care in the U.S.

"Laboratory testing has a major effect on clinical decisions, providing physicians, nurses, and other health care providers with information that aids in the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and management of disease," the report states.

Rasmussen professor Mr. Shelfer earned a medical laboratory technologists degree from the University of Florida, the four-year equivalent of a medical laboratory technician. That program no longer exists.

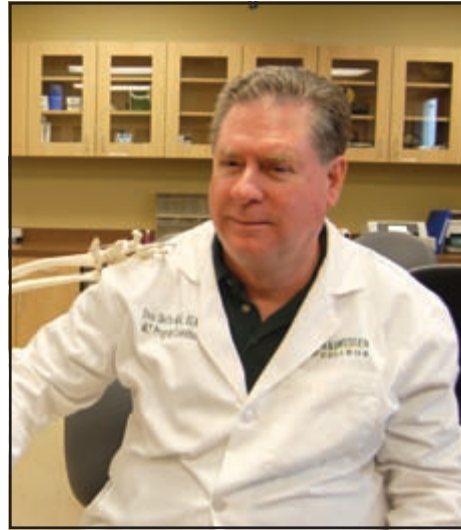
Edison State College and Hodges University don't have a program for laboratory workers. Florida Gulf Coast University offers a four-year medical technologist program, which has similar courses but also general education requirements.

St. Petersburg College is the school closest to Rasmussen to offer an MLT associates' degree. The school also offers it as an online program available to students anywhere in the country where local labs partner with the college for hands-on training. That partnership was available in Lee County up until a few years ago, but no longer exists since DSI laboratories in Fort Myers was purchased by LabCorp.

"With all the baby boomers retiring, there's no end in sight to the shortage (of MLTs)," said Valerie Polansky, director of the MLT program at St. Petersburg College.

The 2004 Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 13,000 new laboratory professionals will be needed in the United States each year; however, current training programs only graduate 5,000 students each year.

The average wage for a lab technician — the two-year degree equivalent — is \$18.48 or \$38,438 per year accord-



COURTESY PHOTO

Professor Steve Shelfer.

ing to the American Society for Clinical Pathology. Those with a four-year degree, or a few more years of experience — a lab technologist — generally will make \$5,000 per year more.

An aging workforce

Besides teaching at Rasmussen, Mr. Shelfer works in a laboratory at NCH Healthcare system in Naples.

"I look around the lab there and see the workforce is in their upper 50s," he said, noting that he is also nearing retirement age. "Every once in a while you see a new student come in. There are not as many people graduating as people leaving the profession."

Gwen DiPietro, 56, took the on-line program offered by St. Petersburg College. She trained at DSI laboratories in Fort Myers, from 2004 to 2007, before it was bought by LabCorp. Now she works in a lab at NCH.

With the medical lab industry becoming more high tech, and growing, Ms. DiPietro feels it will help her move out of the state.

"Now I feel confident I could go out of state and get a job and not have to work at Wal-Mart or Publix," she said. "I want to stay in the medical field. I know I could go anywhere and get a job."

But Ms. DiPietro also plans to retire in the next 10 years with her husband, in Tennessee.

"It seems like there aren't a lot of young people in this field," she said. "If you want to do something in the medical field and it's not direct patient care but you still make a difference, this is the career to get into. A lot of people I'm working with are going to retire and it's like, where is the next crew coming from?" ■

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