

Discover a new career in phlebotomy

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When Brenda Vails got a position at the South Florida Blood Bank, little did she know the position would turn into an amazing and exciting career. "I started out at the South Florida Blood Bank and received my training at the blood bank to draw blood," said Vails. "I enjoyed the challenges of drawing blood and decided that this is what I really wanted to do."

Vails, now a full-time phlebotomist at Palm Beach Diabetes and Endocrine Specialists, PA., in West Palm Beach, loves working with her patients and the satisfaction she gets from making the experience of drawing blood a more pleasant experience. "Everyone has different kinds of veins, so some people are going to be harder to draw from than others," Vails said. "You really need to be aware of what needle to use for certain veins and how to calm people down to get the blood you need to complete their tests."

A phlebotomist is a medical technician specifically trained to take blood samples from patients, and to perform basic laboratory tasks, including setting up samples for analysis and entering lab results in a computer system. They also are responsible for explaining the procedure to patients, updating patient records, preparing stains and reagents, cleaning and sterilizing equipment, taking a patient's blood pressure, pulse and respiration rate, and sending urine and fecal samples to labs for testing. While several medical professionals practice phlebotomy in addition to other skills, many major medical centers and blood donation organizations maintain a staff of phlebotomists to handle blood samples and collection.

A well-trained phlebotomist can take blood samples with minimal pain by using techniques they learned in school or through training. Training varies and can be anywhere from three weeks to six months depending upon the program, state requirements and if certification is being sought. In Florida, phlebotomists only need certification to work in hospitals, and getting a job as a phlebotomist is more difficult without certification. California and Louisiana are the only states to require all persons who are not doctors, nurses or clinical lab scientists to be licensed in order to draw blood. Certification can be perused through the American Society for Clinical Pathology, Association of Phlebotomy Technicians and the National Phlebotomy Association. Certified phlebotomists also must recertify each year to maintain certification.

The training a phlebotomist undergoes includes basic cardiopulmonary resuscitation, bedside skills, legal and ethical issues that surround the handling of blood, and blood-drawing skills. Other training courses include anatomy and physiology, blood and cell composition, blood-sampling procedures and laboratory safety. "I enjoy the challenges of my job, but safety and cleanliness are very important aspects of it as well," added Vails. "You learn not only how to collect blood, but the proper procedures to follow in order to avoid contamination or infection of yourself and others."

Bedside skills are also very important for a phlebotomist, because they often are the only member of a lab that patients interact with. Phlebotomists who work for blood banks, for example, serve as the public face of their organization, and want to encourage donors to come again by offering friendly service, gentle care, and pain-free donation experiences.

The two techniques all phlebotomists are trained in are venipuncture and finger sticks. Finger sticks are used to collect small blood samples and are very easy to perform. Venipuncture is the procedure most people think about when they think of blood sampling. It involves placing a needle into the vein to collect blood.

Venipuncture requires more skills to perform correctly and painlessly. In some cases, a phlebotomist will also receive training in how to take arterial blood, an additional skill which is useful in some situations.

"You must like dealing with patients, and be able to handle those patients who may be frightened or hard to draw blood from," said Vails. "You may be required to work nights or on weekends if you work at a blood bank or hospital. However, many jobs such as laboratories, doctor offices and insurance companies, require phlebotomists more on a 9-to-5 basis."

Dr. Mary Jane Moore, associate vice chancellor of operations at Keiser University in Fort Lauderdale said “in today’s medical world, phlebotomists are well-needed, but the profession can also be a great stepping stone to branch off into other professions in the medical field. We need students to broaden their scope of skills so they can find greater opportunities in today’s job market.

“At Keiser University, we offer an associate of science degree in medical assisting, and Keiser Career College offers the associate of science degree in medical assisting and a diploma in medical assisting. Both degrees mean students complete the core classes for medical assisting, which also includes training in phlebotomy,” Moore added.

“Phlebotomy is very flexible work and anywhere there is medical treatment going on, you can find work,” Moore said. “The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics state that phlebotomy is one of the fastest growing fields through 2016.”