

Laboratory Science Workforce Shortage Affected By Baby Boomer Exits

ASCP weighs in with position and survey

Often dubbed the “hidden healthcare profession,” medical laboratory scientists toil away in hospital labs, clinics and private practices. They run pertinent diagnostic tests, draw blood and examine specimen samples. They are usually the first to spot abnormalities in, and as such, are a key element in the healthcare team. In many cases, lab services make up about five percent of a hospital’s budget, but leverage 70 percent of all critical decision-making.

Despite robust career opportunities and a decent national average salary, the profession continues to struggle with a workforce shortage. According to the 2009 American Society for Clinical Pathology Wage and Vacancy Report, there are various reasons for this shortage: laboratory science educational programs are shutting down, a lack of exposure and awareness about the profession and a high turnover rate in some areas.

Another workforce shortage issue is baby boomer retirement. Thirteen percent of the current laboratory staff is likely to retire in the next five years, according to the survey. Hiring qualified staff to replace baby boomer workers will prove tough with fewer becoming trained. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that by 2012, 138,000 lab professionals will be needed, but fewer than 50,000 will be trained. And as boomers hit their highest healthcare consuming years, an increasing number of laboratory tests will exacerbate the need for trained laboratory professionals.



Mark H. Stoler

“The average age of the laboratory workforce is about 50 and each year steadily increases,” said ASCP President Mark H. Stoler. “ASCP is taking steps to mitigate the baby boomer exodus from the profession. We are raising awareness in the media and on Capitol Hill, National Medical Laboratory Professionals Week recognizes the superb work being done in the labs across the country and our new Ambassador Program taps newer professionals to share their passion for the profession with pre-college students.”

A graying workforce presents other issues because they tend to generally leave the work force through retirement faster than younger health personnel and are more susceptible to adverse health and safety risks associated with shift work.

OTHER ASCP WAGE & VACANCY STATS ON THE SHORTAGE IN THE NORTHEAST:

- Eight out of 10 hospitals (83 percent) and high-volume test sites (85 percent) reported difficulties in filling staff level MT positions.
- Retirement projections for the Northeast region is better than other regions, but is still projected to be around 6 percent in the next five years due to baby boomer retirement.
- Overall, 42 percent of labs in the Northeast are having difficulty hiring certified laboratory professionals.

The ASCP Wage and Vacancy Report can be viewed at <http://www.ascp.org/pdf/Membership-Communications/Wage-and-Vacancy-Survey.aspx>.

For the ASCP position on the medical laboratory workforce shortage, visit <http://www.ascp.org/pdf/MedicalLaboratoryPersonnelShortage.aspx>. †

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Alcohol Addiction Among the Baby Boomer Generation

By Neil Capretto



Not only are baby boomers America’s largest generation, they are one of the fastest growing groups facing alcohol addiction. For those born between 1946 and 1964, the need for addiction treatment is expected to nearly triple by 2020, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). SAMHSA also reports that although problem drinking rates have dropped sharply among generations in the past, researchers believe baby boomers’ habits may not decline as much, given their generation’s social acceptance of alcohol.

Although the heaviest drinking usually takes place among those 18 to 30 years of age, baby boomers who are consistently binge drinking may face more serious health problems than their younger counterparts simply because their bodies do not have the same tolerance level at an older age. For instance, three drinks at age 45 may have a greater negative effect than 10 drinks at age 25. On top of that, many boomers take a variety of prescription medications. When these medicines are combined with alcohol, it can be a recipe for disaster.

Many people are able to drink alcohol responsibly without having problems. Yet for 18 million Americans, alcohol use is a serious problem, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD). Of the total number of people who drink alcohol, about 15 percent will become alcohol dependent at some point in their lives.

Risk factors for late onset alcohol addiction include a family history of alcoholism, loneliness and boredom as well as a variety of life changes such as retirement, divorce, unemployment, “empty nest syndrome,” financial losses in the stock market or death of a spouse. In addition, many boomers are facing high stress levels because they have to care for aging parents while they raise and support their own children. In other cases, boomers want to reward themselves by indulging in alcohol as a way to relax. Nevertheless, one or a combination of these factors can spark a return to their younger “glory days” of binge drinking or bring to the surface a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.

People should seek professional help if they are unable to control the amount and frequency of their alcohol use despite repeated negative consequences. People often want to deny their problem and rationalize with statements such as “It’s not that bad” or “I don’t drink as much as someone else I know.” Yet, a slippery slope begins when individuals are not honest with themselves and turn to alcohol as a solution for their problems.

To stress the serious nature of alcohol abuse, NCADD has been sponsoring April as “Alcohol Awareness Month” since 1987. Alcohol Awareness Month is a national campaign encouraging local communities to focus on alcoholism and alcohol-related issues through prevention efforts and screenings.

The simplest alcoholic screening test is the CAGE Questionnaire, which was developed by John Ewing, M.D. The following four questions are used by many healthcare professionals to quickly assess an individual’s potential drinking problem. Two or more “yes answers” are highly suggestive of alcohol dependence.

- Have you ever felt you should *Cut* down on your drinking?
- Have people *Annoyed* you by criticizing your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or *Guilty* about your drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (*Eye opener*)?

Alcohol addiction is a disease that does not discriminate. It can affect anyone regardless of age, race, religion or socioeconomic status. The good news is individuals and families can have hope knowing that addiction is a treatable disease.

It is important that all individuals facing the disease of addiction—including baby boomers—choose a treatment program that holistically treats the biological, psychological, social and spiritual needs of its patients. To learn more about the treatment options available through Gateway Rehab, call 800-472-1177 or visit www.gatewayrehab.org. For information about recovery support services, individuals can contact Alcoholics Anonymous at www.aa.org and families can contact Al-Anon/Alateen at www.al-anon.org. †

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