

# Tip of the Month

## It's About Time

**W**hen it comes to drawing blood samples, timing is everything.

From the time you receive the order until the sample is handed to the testing personnel, numerous clocks will tick off precious seconds. If they run out of time your ability to deliver samples capable of rendering accurate test results expires, your potential to protect the patient from injury runs out, and your likelihood of escaping a bloodborne exposure has counted down to zero.

Just like the sands of the hourglass, so are the ways of phlebotomy. Before the clock runs out on you and your patients, consider these reminders of the time-sensitive nature of drawing, handling, processing blood samples, and make sure your timing is perfect.

***Draw time***—Draw TDMs and other timed tests precisely. Your patient is depending on you to get it right so his physician can get his medications right. Likewise, respond to fever-dependent blood cultures as if they were stat. By the time bacteria cause a fever spike, their concentration is already on the decline. The faster you respond, the faster the microbiology department will identify the causative organism and the sooner the patient will be on the right antibiotic.

***Handwashing time***—Too many phlebotomists either skip this step or “technically” wash their hands by merely getting them wet and dry in a hurry. Friction is the important factor for handwashing. Soap doesn’t kill on contact like bug spray. Proper handwashing between patients should take 20 seconds, or as long as it takes to hum the lyrics to “Happy Birthday” twice.

***ID time***—By not taking the time to properly seek and confirm every patient’s identification, time can run out on them before it should. Eleven percent of transfusion deaths occur because phlebotomists fail to properly ID the patient or the sample.

***Survey time***—Do you draw from the first vein you find? Not after today. Every patient deserves for you to spend time finding the most prominent vein, and the one furthest away from nerves and arteries. Not only that, but the standards require it.

***Cleansing time***—One quick wipe is pointless. For routing lab work, cleanse the site thoroughly with isopropyl alcohol. For blood cultures, conduct a 30-second friction scrub, then allow the antiseptic to remain in contact with the skin for at least 30 seconds. Cutting this step short contaminates the culture, cheats the patient, and increases the cost of care.

***Tourniquet time***—Sixty seconds: that’s the maximum length of time a tourniquet should be applied prior to accessing the vein. If it takes longer to find and access it, release the constriction for two minutes, then reapply and access the vein within a minute. A longer constriction causes changes significant enough to change the way the patient is treated, diagnosed, medicated and managed.

***Observation time***—After the draw, if you don’t remove the gauze and watch the site for at least 10 seconds after pressure is removed, you’ll never know if the patient is still bleeding or not. Don’t assume everything is okay without taking ten seconds to watch. Time is money, especially when the lack thereof leads to complications and litigation from a subcutaneous hemorrhage that could have been caught.

***Label time***—“Stat” doesn’t mean “label the sample later.” Nothing should prevent you from taking the time to label all samples in the presence of the patient. Nothing.

***Assessment time***—Releasing a patient from your care too soon can be a timely mistake. Ask all patients if they feel all right before leaving their side or allowing them to leave yours. But don’t trust their answer completely. Assess every patient for their potential to pass out regardless of what they tell you. Statistics tell us 2.5 percent of patients will pass out during or immediately following a blood draw. For many, it’s just as much of a surprise to them as it is to you. Know the signs of an imminent loss of consciousness, and be prepared to react.

In phlebotomy, timing really is everything. If you’ve got these times down, your time in healthcare is well spent, and the patients you draw will receive the best possible outcome, time and time again. Not only that, but whenever a promotion comes up or a raise is being considered, your supervisor might just think about you and say, “it’s about time.”