

Tip of the Month



Fudging the Numbers

One question all healthcare professionals with specimen collection responsibilities must ask themselves is “When I draw blood specimens for the laboratory, am I fudging the numbers?”

If you look at clinical laboratories as a manufacturing process, you could say that labs turn blood into numbers. Oh, it's a whole lot more complicated than that, but essentially that's what they do. Phlebotomists and other healthcare professionals draw blood and deliver it to the laboratory to test and report results in the form of numbers to physicians. Sometimes it's text, but mostly numbers. Physicians then use those numbers to restore and maintain the patient's health. Simple as that... sort of.

The problem is, the numbers the lab extracts from blood must accurately reflect the patient's state of health. If the numbers are fudged inadvertently during the collection or processing of the specimen, the physician is not likely to properly manage the patient back to health. The only way to avoid fudging the numbers is to know that deviating from the standard procedure can alter test results.

- Do you leave the tourniquet on longer than 1 minute before drawing the specimen? Then you could be fudging the cholesterol, albumin, total protein, and every component that makes up the CBC.
- Do you underfill the tubes that you submit for testing? Then you could be fudging the results of every test performed on that tube.
- Do you tell patients to pump their fist? Then you're probably fudging their potassium results with potentially disastrous consequences.
- Do you fail to properly identify your patients? If so, then it's likely that all of the numbers are fudged on some of your patients. That's not good.

Scores of other seemingly minor deviations from the proper procedure for specimen collection render specimens incapable of yielding test results that accurately reflect the patient's state of health. Physicians rely on laboratory tests results for 70% of the objective information on their patients' status. The only way to keep from changing test results during the collection or processing of blood is to respect its complexity and know exactly how your technique can influence the information physicians rely upon. Those who study the procedure manual and never stray from the established protocol know that knowledge is power, and that fudge is not part of the equation.

If you count calories, you might fudge the numbers in your diet. If you do your own taxes, you might fudge the numbers on your return. If your work involves travel, you might even fudge the numbers of your expense report. Fudging these numbers usually comes back on you in the form of consequences. But if you are unknowingly fudging the numbers of a patient's test results by not drawing or processing specimens correctly, it's the patient who pays the price.

To help the laboratory extract the most accurate numbers from the specimens you submit, make sure the only fudging you do involves ice cream.