

BULLETIN

Technology: Essential to your health

June 1, 2006

The Report: June / July 2006 vol.27 num.3

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN

The basic job description for Biomedical Engineering Technologists (BMET) sounds undeniably dry: they take care of medical equipment. But in reality the job is varied and interesting, involving a multitude of skills and demanding, occasionally, miracles, says Ron Fyffe, a BMET at Vancouver General Hospital, where he is also an HSA steward.

-Day to day I never know exactly what Ill be doing," he says. -Its not a routine kind of thing at all. Its much more comprehensive than looking after the equipment. We also deal with the people who use the equipment ... doctors, nurses, technologists."

Excellent written and verbal communication skills are essential, giving the lie to the old cliché that technical types are, well, socially limited.

-You have to write and interpret manuals and do presentations for the end user. You have to make sure they know enough, but not boggle them with too much information. It means knowing your audience. Id do a different presentation to other BMETs than to a nurse or doctor who is going to be operating a piece of equipment," says Fyffe.

-We also look after acquiring the equipment, so were looking at specs, trying it out, and looking at how its going to be used on-site," says Fyffe. Because technology is always advancing, the job involves constant learning.

-One of the things I love about my job is going on training courses and learning about the new stuff," says Fyffe.

And then there are the miracles.

-I specialize in the operating room, so theres a typical high-pressure situation that we get thrown into," says Fyffe. A scheduled surgery is set to go ... but a piece of equipment doesnt work. -So you have to get this thing working or the surgery is not going to go ahead. The patient maybe has been waiting a long time and has gone through lots of preparation. The doctor is looking at you. Everyone is waiting for you to do your miracle," says Fyffe.

In these sorts of situations, its obvious how essential a BMET is. But in some ways, their most important work is invisible. Ideally, we dont see too many of these last-minute malfunctions, and that is because the BMETs have been hard at work, taking proactive steps to prevent problems.

-We do ongoing testing and checks of all equipment. There are accidents waiting to happen in the operating room all the time. They are subject to litigation all over the place. We dont want that. A big part of our job is ensuring things go as planned and that equipment works as it is supposed to," says Fyffe.

BMETs also play a role in keeping budgets manageable. -There are money pressures as technology becomes so much more expensive. Costs are skyrocketing. They look to us to control expenses. If we can keep a piece of equipment going rather than needing to replace it, that saves money. Or if we can repair it in-house instead of sending it out, that costs less and saves down-time," says Fyffe.

The most rewarding part of his job, says Fyffe, comes in knowing he is helping medical professionals do their job. -It is nice when people appreciate what youve done. Thats the reward ... when people say thanks for being so prompt and they know they can carry on and not worry about their equipment."

The opportunity to work with technology is definitely a lure for Fyffe. -I like working with all the equipment. I like learning about it," he says. Asked what his favourite piece of equipment is, he hesitates, unable to find an answer.

Ron Fyffe Biomedical Engineering Technologist General Steward Vancouver General Hospital

-To tell the truth," he finally says, -My favourite is the latest thing I havent seen yet. I want to learn all about it and take it apart and see how it works. I have this curiosity that makes me want to learn all the time. I want to know whats inside the box."

His love of technology is what steered him towards his career. -About 20 years ago I was working in construction as an electrician. I thought I might be more suited to something more technical. I investigated options; BCIT had a good reputation. I ended up talking to a friend of a friend to find out what was involved in it. Funnily enough, that guy is now my supervisor!"

After he completed his training at BCIT in 1990, Fyffe worked at George Pearson Centre, an extended care facility, before transferring to Vancouver General in 2001. There he is one of 32 BMETs.

BMET is a fairly recent profession. -It has only been around for about 30 years," explains Fyffe. -It evolved out of the maintenance department when the equipment was becoming too complex for them." The role of the BMET is changing as technology changes, moving from an emphasis on maintenance and repair to a more comprehensive function.

BMETs union representation has also changed over the years, in a fairly complex story that has ended with a Labour Relations Board ruling that HSA should represent them.

-We are very happy to be part of HSA. We have common interests with the other health science professionals," says Fyffe.

Back when Fyffe first began working as a BMET, the profession was split between the Hospital Employees Union and HSA. In 1996, when the different bargaining associations were formed through legislation, the LRB ruled that all BMETs belonged in the facilities support unit.

-Then, two years ago, we decided to reopen the issue, saying the facts had changed and we felt even more that we belonged in HSA. This time our employers supported it." After an extensive Labour Relations Board process, the LRB ruled in May 2005 that BMETs should be placed in the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association and represented by HSA. (This issue is not completely resolved, as HEU has filed for a judicial review of the LRB decision, scheduled for June 21-22.)

-Now all of us are in HSA," says Fyffe.

-Were happy to be in a group that we see as a group of our peers. We always felt we were health science professionals. 

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017