

BULLETIN

## Award recognizes leader in her field

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CYTOGENETIC TECHNOLOGIST CHRISTINE HAESSIG

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN

**-THE VERY FIRST TIME** I looked down a microscope I was immediately very interested," says HSA member Christine Haessig. -From an early age, I always knew I was going to go to university and have a career in the scientific field."

If that microscope could have shown Haessig the future, she would have seen not only that her childhood conviction was well-founded, but also that she would be publically recognized as a leader in her profession.

In June of this year, Haessig was presented the Outstanding Achievement Award during the awards banquet at the annual Association of Genetic Technologists (AGT) conference in Florida. She was, of course, thrilled. Even more so because Haessig, Technical Supervisor of the Cytogenetics Lab in the Department of Pathology at Vancouver General Hospital, knew just how prestigious this award is.

-The people who received it before me are really amazing," she says. -After I won, one of them came up to me and said, "Welcome to the family. That's a very special group to belong to."

The Outstanding Achievements Award is the highest honour bestowed by AGT, an organization that operates mainly in North America but includes members from all over the globe. It recognizes an AGT member who performs above and beyond the call of duty. Haessig had been nominated twice in the past but seen the award go to someone else. She is only the second Canadian to receive this honour.

The criteria for the award are complex and extensive. -You have to be nominated by one of your peers; you need a letter from your director, and you have to write a letter yourself," says Haessig. -You have to explain your history in the field, and your service to AGT. They look at your contribution to education [both in educational institutes and within AGT], development of new methods, and your publications. And they look at your own education."

In all these areas, Haessig has an impressive track record. Since receiving her certificate in cytogenetics, she has twice returned to school, once for a post-graduate diploma in molecular genetics, and once, more recently, for healthcare management. She teaches in the cytogenetics program at BCIT, where she has chaired both the clinical instructors committee and the advisory committee, developed a student handbook on basic competencies, and has been involved in standardizing education at clinical sites. She has published regularly over the years and most recently contributed a chapter on computer imaging to the AGT manual.

Within AGT she has directed two annual scientific meetings, served as membership director, sat on a number of committees and made presentations at AGT symposia. In the late 90s, it was Haessig who, recognizing the need for her professional association to respond to change, proposed changing the name from the Association of Cytogenetic Technologists to the present name, which enabled the organization to broaden its scope.

Haessig is passionate, and articulate, about the value of the type of involvement she models. She credits her father with giving her the drive to make an exceptional contribution to her field.

-When I was very young my dad said that whatever I decide to do in life, I need to be the very best I can be. He said, "Whatever you do, it doesn't matter ... be the best and don't settle for average. I've really taken that to heart. The average person will get things done, but you have to go the extra mile.

-You can look at your career as a day to day job or you can try to get more out of it, which means doing extra."

That extra, she says, is what makes her career exciting.

-If you're curious about things and you want to improve things you examine them and make them better. And you want to share your work with others. That's what AGT is about. You have this tremendous collaboration. It's all about uplifting your field and promoting your professionalism."

**CYTOGENETICS IS THE STUDY** of chromosomes. A cytogenetics lab analyzes blood, amniotic fluid and bone marrow specimens, yielding results that can determine why a woman may have trouble sustaining a pregnancy, whether or not a fetus is healthy, and if not, what the issues are. The bone marrow tests determine if cancer of the blood is present, i.e. what type of leukemia, and thus what treatment would be best.

Cytogenetics lab work is unusually painstaking, says Haessig.

-Other types of technologies will have hundreds of specimens go through their machines in an hour; here we do every thing by hand so we have three to five specimens per tech per week. You have to watch the cultures grow day by day and there is a lot of troubleshooting," she says.

As a result, educational requirements are high. In order to apply for the 13-month Genetics Technology Program at BCIT, students need to have a Bachelor of Sciences degree. The program head interviews all the applicants and preselects a group to be interviewed by a panel of laboratory supervisors (Haessig sits on this panel). Only seven students from BC go into the program.

The program recently expanded to include molecular genetics as well as cytogenetics.

-This is a very dynamic field; things are changing quickly. The human genome project has really expanded the field and the technology has really developed," says Haessig. -One thing I love about this field is that it is extremely dynamic and exciting. It's always expanding." New technologies include Fluorescence In Situ Hybridization (FISH) and Comparative Genomic Hybridization (CGH) Array. -We are getting to the DNA level. But we are still analysing chromosomes," she adds.

Since that early look down her first microscope, Haessig has come a long way, although in a certain sense she's still right there, practicing science and finding it very interesting. 

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