

BULLETIN

A perfect fit

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MEDICAL RADIATION TECHNOLOGIST Christin Lumsden credits an innovative school program for pointing her in the direction of a job she loves.

She considers herself lucky to have found a profession that perfectly fits her interests: its varied, offers meaningful human relationships, lets her use sophisticated technology, and provides many opportunities for continual learning and career growth. As well, jobs are plentiful.

She had never contemplated medical radiation technology when she entered a grade ten job shadowing program.

"I had thought I wanted to be a dental hygienist, but when I went to see what they did, I thought, 'no way. I went to the nursing ward and shadowed an acute care nurse and a pediatric nurse and felt that no, that's not really for me either. But when I shadowed the medical radiation technologist, I got really interested,'" she says.

Lumsden redirected her high school studies to include the physics and biology she needed, and enrolled in what is now a two-year program at BCIT. She graduated as a general radiation technologist and has worked at Surrey Memorial Hospital for eight years, doing diagnostic imaging with a specialty in interventional procedures.

Interventional work, for a medical radiation technologist, means using imaging to direct procedures, both diagnostic and therapeutic. The images provide the road maps that allow the radiologist to guide instruments such as needles and catheters through the body.

"Mostly I am working with cancer patients, but also those with liver disease and renal failure. I assist with procedures like chest-tube insertions, abscess drainages, biopsies, percutaneous nephrostomies (draining urine from the kidneys when there is a blockage due to cancer or kidney stones, for example) and gastric tube (short term feeding tube) insertions. A lot of the things that used to be done in the operating room we now can do in medical imaging, using minimally invasive procedures, which is great," she says. This reduces physical trauma and infection rates, and shortens recovery time.

Lumsden loves learning about and using advanced technology, but she also really enjoys developing relationships with patients. Specializing in interventional work gives her this opportunity. "We get to spend more time with patients, compared to performing general radiography, and so I really feel I am making a difference in the patients experience" she explains.

This side of her work demands patience, knowledge and a positive or sometimes objective attitude, says Lumsden. She works hard to bring these qualities to every single encounter.

"We will spend up to an hour with a client, and some we see frequently because they are coming back regularly for the same procedure, or followups. I answer their questions, and respond to their concerns, and hopefully make the procedure more comfortable for them.

-Everyone says I'm happy and pleasant to be around, and they say that helps them. It's better than seeing someone who is tired and overworked ... which of course I am but I would never tell them!" says Lumsden with a laugh.

Indeed, the heavy workload, due to an underfunded health care system, is the only dark cloud in an otherwise sunny work situation for Lumsden.

-We're all really happy with our jobs, but we're frustrated with the government. Everyone else ... employers, patients, and co-workers ... appreciate us, but the government does not recognize how hard we work and how sensible it is to fund public health care," she says.

Lumsden recently witnessed the effect of a 10% cut in medical imaging funding across British Columbia. -This has meant consolidation of workplaces, changes in job descriptions, and a loss of supervisory and technologist positions. We are lucky here at Surrey Memorial because we were reaching our benchmarks and are opening a new outpatient facility in June which created new jobs, but I see how it has impacted other sites."

Lumsden praises her employer for keeping workloads manageable by setting a benchmark total of exams she and each of her colleagues can perform. -We are still achieving higher than the benchmark but this will hopefully improve with the opening of the outpatient facility," she says. -We definitely work full out when we are on duty."

In this pressured environment, the unions work to protect employees really stands out.

-I know I work really hard, but I also appreciate my personal time. If overtime is required I communicate with my management to make sure I get paid for it. And I advocate to my co-workers that they don't have to work for free, either. That's one of the reasons why I'm a steward."

Lumsden became an HSA steward four years ago after discovering for herself how helpful the union can be when needed.

-I had some workplace concerns and spoke with our chief steward about them. I was really impressed by the way I got my questions answered. My steward encouraged me to become a more active participant with HSA. So I went to steward training provided by HSA and attended the annual convention to see our unions democracy first hand. It really helped me feel confident to speak out," she says. As well as her stewardship position, Lumsden was elected as a member-at-large (MAL) two years ago, a position which got her more involved with activism and the HSA committees such as the resolutions committee.

Lumsden says that for her, the ability to stand up and defend workers' rights is a learned skill. -It takes experience, knowledge and confidence. I really credit the training and support I've received from HSA, and I'm always learning and trying to gain more knowledge so I can be more effective."

Although Lumsden is a busy person, she doesn't see "not enough time" as a reason to avoid union activism. -It's a small time commitment, really. There is no obligation to do more than I can manage. That's how I promote involvement: do as much or as little as you can. Any amount helps. Everyone can make a difference by putting in a bit of effort and work."

After all, she points out, the rewards are tremendous. -It's been so great meeting HSA members from all professions, and from all over the province, and working with the staff at HSA. I really appreciate all the hard work and experience and knowledge that they bring. I feel very comfortable knowing that's where my union dues are going."

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