

Working Outside the Hospital Presents Expanded Opportunities

Andrea Hall

As a student preparing for a job in medical technology, you may envision a career working inside a hospital. However, many have chosen alternative paths that they have found both challenging and rewarding. Take, for example, the four medical technology professionals profiled in this article, who made very different decisions.

“When I left college, I never imagined the career path I’d take,” says Elliot Sloane, PhD. As a college professor and advisor to hospitals and agencies, Sloane has been able to weave two career paths together. He currently splits his time equally between Villanova University, where he is an assistant professor in the Department of Decision and Information Technology; and as a consultant, helping hospitals around the globe decide what equipment to purchase, as well as investigating accidents and deaths, and improving standards.

Brian Poplin, CHE, CBET, has worked inside hospitals, for a major corporation, and as a member of a hospital’s board of trustees. After four years as a BMET in the Air Force, Poplin worked his way up the career ladder at ServiceMaster (and its successor company, ARAMARK). He is currently the vice president of strategic development for ARAMARK’s Healthcare Management Services, providing clinical engineering management to healthcare facilities nationwide.

For Nancy Pressly, she began her career with the FDA 18 years ago when she was hired as a biomedical engineer just out of college. She liked it, stayed, and today is a policy analyst at the FDA’s Center for Devices and Radiological Health (CDRH), bringing an engineer’s perspective to solving problems associated with medical device adverse events.

As a healthcare engineering consultant, Tom O’Dea, PhD, PE, CCE, works with developers of medical devices. “I help them establish a theoretical framework, write an article for the technical literature, help create a prototype, and work with a patent lawyer,” he says.

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Check List

A biomedical equipment technician is a vital component of the healthcare delivery system.

- ✓ Employed primarily by hospitals, biomedes are responsible for maintaining a facility’s medical and patient care equipment. However, biomedes could also consider jobs with independent service organizations, research laboratories, military healthcare facilities, blood banks, and nursing home clinics.

- ✓ In addition to servicing equipment, biomedes can conduct product evaluations and make purchasing recommendations, install new equipment, provide in-service education, coordinate service contracts, manage assets, and investigate device-related incidents. Biomedes are also directly involved in training physicians, nurses, and laboratory workers on how to use the equipment.

Education is Key

Although the four took very different career paths, all agree that education is vital to success. Poplin, for example, finished his education while working full-time, earning a bachelor’s degree in business administration and a master’s degree in business management, “because I wanted the advancement,” he says. He is also board certified in healthcare management by the American College of Healthcare Executives, another component he felt was important in moving his career forward.

Sloane also continued his education while working full-time. He holds a master’s degree in mini/micro computers, digital electronics, and advanced computer programming, as well as a PhD in information science and technology. “I felt like I needed more solid credentials and more than just biomedical engineering,” he adds. “As it turned out, the fields of clinical engineering, biomed, and information systems have been converging. I don’t know if I intuitively sensed that would happen or it was just dumb luck.” He advises his

students that because of uncertainties in the marketplace, they should “have two parachutes. They should dig deep into their learning reserves to gain a second skill.”

Although Pressly wishes she had gone back to school too, she says that it’s important that biomed and engineers strengthen their writing and communication skills throughout their career. For example, at the FDA, Pressly says that good writing and communication skills are vital in drafting public health notifications and telling engineers about problems with equipment.

Pros and Cons

Although jobs at hospitals are often rewarding, Poplin says that ARAMARK gave him more opportunities than he would have otherwise. He says that his career with the company has been accelerated because he’s been willing to relocate. “I’ve moved three times in 11 years, but I’ve had a total of nine different sets of opportunities presented to me during that time,” he adds.

For Pressly, “the government is a great place to work,” she says. “It might not be the highest paying employer but I’m not sure hospitals are either.” As a mother of four, Pressly enjoys having flexible work hours, which include the ability to work any 80 hours in a two-week period and work at home one day a week. “One of the reasons I’ve not gone into management is that managers don’t have the opportunity to take advantage of these things,” she says.

O’Dea also likes the flexibility that consulting offers. “I like the type of schedule and type of creativity in the work I do now,” O’Dea says. “If I don’t like a particular job, I can say ‘no,’” he adds. He notes that his work would be difficult if he “had a mortgage and a lot of bills each month.” He explains that the health insurance and other benefits he receives from his previous employer have made being self-employed much easier.

Sloane liked working for a small company because he worked directly with the chief executive officer. “For most clinical engineers and biomed, this is not the case,” he notes, adding, “I got some very valuable mentoring and guidance from those CEOs.”

All four professionals are happy with the paths they have chosen. As Poplin says, “there are a lot of unique ways to impact healthcare.” ■

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