Why Do We Matter?
By Genan Holder, BS, CRCST, CHL, CIS

Some days, when I enter the Central Service department, the 80s song “Manic Monday” seems like an all too fitting theme song. The pace is fast and furious, and it seems we’re always working diligently to beat the clock to turn instruments around for the next procedure within a given (and, sometimes, unrealistic) timeframe.

Despite the hectic pace in the department, I truly do enjoy many aspects of my job. The work is never dull or boring. Technology has influenced the changes in instrumentation, and techniques in the Operating Room, which forces us to stay on our toes. Frenzied pace aside, each day is a new adventure.

What I love most about this job is how each CS technician is on the front line defensive against infection and injury. What we do and how we do it matters — and it has a direct impact on patient care and outcomes. How is this, you might ask, when we rarely, if ever, come in direct contact with the patient? Well, we mustn’t forget that we are the hands and eyes responsible for cleaning, decontaminating, sterilization, assembling, testing, and otherwise managing the instruments and equipment used on the patient. We must properly and diligently test the insulation on laparoscopic equipment, so patients are not inadvertently burned. We must ensure that the arms on robotic equipment are completely functional.

So many instruments (i.e., scissors, osteotomes, needleholders, and more) can injure a patient if they’re not tested properly or fail to meet standards. It is our responsibility to clean, test and even remove any instrument from service that does not meet the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) standards or the manufacturer’s Instructions for Use (IFU).

Lead by example

If there’s a downside to our profession, it’s that our work often goes unnoticed and is undervalued by many other healthcare professionals. Despite the fact that we are dedicated, hard-working professionals, and the work we perform each day is vital to quality customer service and successful patient outcomes, hospital staff may treat us as if our career is “just a job.”

Unfortunately, when we are met with this type of negative perception, we may begin to view ourselves and our profession the same way. And when that happens, no one wins. Technicians who view their work in CS as a mere job, not a true profession or career, must change that mindset. We must find satisfaction in knowing that we can and do make a difference. Our services are needed by the trained professionals within the hospital, and by the many patients and family members who visit the hospital and its affiliated clinics each day.

As technicians, we are responsible for behaving as consummate professionals, even when our colleagues do not always view the work we perform as “professional” or “vital.” How do we
maintain a professional mindset in the face of opposition? We must begin by giving ourselves credit for our knowledge and experience. We must celebrate who we are and how we are different. We must never belittle ourselves or our coworkers for lacking the knowledge to perform a task. If we do not know how to perform a task, we must ask. Learning is proactive and it is critically important to our long-term growth and professional advancement.

True professionals research and ask questions. Part of becoming a respected professional is to ask, research and learn how to perform a desired task. We must never be afraid to ask a question because seeking knowledge is vital to quality, safety and successful outcomes. Even the most famous, wise and experienced scientists and researchers ask questions – that’s how they continue to grow, learn and advance as esteemed professionals.

We must do our very best at every task within the department, and this requires research. If we know we are doing our best, then we should take pride in that. Behaving in a friendly manner, standing tall and smiling, conveys both confidence and approachability – two traits that make others desire to be in our presence and more willing to reach out to us for help. Conveyance of confidence and a positive attitude positively alters people’s perceptions and it also makes others take notice of our quality-driven performance. When we feel confident, we do a better job.

When other professionals within the hospital witness us seeking knowledge and desiring to improve our performance with a positive attitude, their perception of CS professionals will begin to change. This will not happen immediately, but it will happen and it will be highly rewarding.

The most important components for becoming recognized, valued and respected as a professional are education and credentials. Hospitals across the United States are slowly requiring that all CS technicians become certified, and that is a positive development. Certification means that we have met a standard for being able to effectively perform the tasks required within our chosen profession.

Continuing education keeps CS professionals up-to-date with how and why certain standards are required – and how they are changing. As professionals, we must be well versed on the standards and best practices that help us perform our on-the-job roles and responsibilities safely and effectively. We must also continue to attend seminars and read literature that pertains to our industry, so we can arm ourselves with information, advance our knowledge and provide the patient with the very best instrumentation and outcomes.

In Conclusion

Why do we CS professionals matter? We matter because we are the unsung soldiers in the war against infection. No surgery anywhere in the world could take place without us. CS is undergoing a metamorphosis – a constant evolution that requires its professionals to commit to ongoing knowledge, professional growth and advancement.

Those of us in this profession must continue to be proactive -- obtaining certification, accessing and staying abreast of the latest industry standards, attending seminars and conferences, and reviewing literature to stay abreast of what is required for us to perform our duties safely, consistently and effectively. Our world in CS is extremely chaotic and complex, but our commitment to quality, maintaining a positive attitude and becoming our personal best will give us the tools we need to continue to grow, thrive and succeed.
Gaining Respect in CS and Beyond

Many Central Service professionals can attest that respect from peers, customers and facility executives is sometimes lacking. The good news is respect is something that can be earned. Following these steps can help, according to Genan Holder, BS, CRCST, CIS, CHL:

• Respect yourself. We can’t expect others to show us respect if we don’t do it ourselves. Self-respect involves behaving professionally; dressing appropriately; following policies, procedures, guidelines, and standards; and taking proper care of oneself (this includes proper grooming and getting adequate rest, so we’re engaged and focused on the job). We must always demonstrate pride and respect for the facility in which we work, and be proud of our contributions.

• Focus on integrity. Be honest and reliable. Do not commit to anything you cannot perform or deliver with quality and safety. Never promise to complete the turnaround of a tray without informing the recipient of all the variables involved. If a request is unrealistic, make sure all parties involved are informed. Honesty and reliability will earn respect in the long-run.

• Be willing to accept criticism. When people discover you are good at what you do, you will likely face more criticism. This may seem unfair, but it’s a harsh reality that all professionals experience. Handle the comments with dignity and use them as a learning tool. Learning comes from making mistakes and a willingness to see something from another person’s perspective.

• Focus on the details. All professionals hold in high esteem those individuals who are competent, professional and excel at their work. Becoming competent on the job is the fastest way to earn respect, and this requires careful attention to the details and minutia. As Oprah Winfrey says, “the love is in the details.” Competency and respect are also generated in the details. In healthcare, and certainly in CS, it’s sometimes the smallest details that make the biggest difference.