

# Pathology

## The Facts

### Who works in **pathology** and what do they do?

Australia's pathology workforce consists of about 24,000 people who collect, process and report on approximately 500 million pathology tests each year. These tests play a vital role in more than 70% of medical diagnoses and inform many of the clinical decisions related to patient care. A typical pathology laboratory uses a variety of scientific methods to test and report on pathology samples, and the workforce is very diverse. Here is a snapshot of the people who work in pathology, including some points to consider.

#### Collection, transportation and preparation for testing

**Collectors** are trained to collect specimens from people's bodies such as blood from a vein or swabs from a wound. They are usually trained by pathology laboratories through internal training programs, or they may have a qualification from a technical college. Collectors are usually the only pathology staff most patients will see.

Did you know?

*Correct identification and labelling of pathology specimens is a key patient safety and quality issue in pathology.*

Did you know?

*Collectors can provide information about collection procedures such as advice on preparing for a pathology test and what to do after the test. However, they are not trained or qualified to answer questions about the medical reason a pathology test was requested, or to discuss test results. These questions should be directed to the treating practitioner who requested the pathology test.*

**Couriers** are trained by the pathology laboratory to transport pathology specimens and deliver reports and materials, such as collection supplies, to healthcare facilities.

**Laboratory assistants** are trained by the pathology laboratory to perform many of the tasks that involve specimen handling. They confirm specimens are correctly identified and labelled and carry out preliminary processing steps such as dividing specimens into smaller portions for specific tests and directing them to the relevant parts of the pathology laboratory. Laboratory assistants are not generally required to have any specific post-school qualifications.



## Testing, reporting of results and liaising with treating practitioners

**Pathologists** are medical graduates who have undergone additional specialist study, training and examinations in pathology. They study the cause of diseases and the ways diseases affect the body by examining changes in tissues, blood and other body fluids. Pathologists also provide expert clinical advice relating to the interpretation of pathology results to treating practitioners, such as explaining the significance of particular test results or how a disease should be managed based on test results. It takes a minimum of 13 years to become a pathologist.

**Medical scientists and laboratory technicians** perform most of the actual testing of specimens but work closely in consultation with pathologists. Medical scientists usually have a university degree in laboratory science, while some have higher qualifications such as a Masters degree or PhD. Laboratory technicians may have a qualification from a technical college, or an Associate Diploma level of training in laboratory techniques.

**Ancillary staff** play an important role in the pathology process. They provide expertise in areas such as management, secretarial support, reception duties, data entry, information technology, health informatics, human resources, accounts and stores.

Did you know?

*There is a worldwide shortage of pathologists and medical scientists. These shortages can compromise the delivery of pathology-related services including the timeliness, quality and accuracy of diagnosis for a range of diseases. Professional organisations, such as the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA), are working with the government and educational institutions to ensure there will be enough properly trained professionals to provide the pathology testing needed by Australians in coming years.*

### Reliable information on pathology can be found at:

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) - [www.rcpa.edu.au](http://www.rcpa.edu.au)

ePathWay (the RCPA's online magazine for consumers) - <http://epathway.rcpa.edu.au>

The RCPA Manual - <http://rcpamanual.edu.au>

The Pathology Associations Council (PAC) - [www.pathology.med.pro](http://www.pathology.med.pro)

Lab Tests Online - [www.labtestsonline.org.au](http://www.labtestsonline.org.au)

