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Addressing laboratory staffing shortages is critical for healthcare's future

Reaching new heights since the pandemic, the shortage of skilled healthcare workers continues to be a challenge here in the United States and around the world. Nearly every healthcare delivery point has been affected, including diagnostic laboratories that provide insights to help healthcare providers find the right treatments for patients. According to the Association for Diagnostics and Laboratory Medicine, 70% of the healthcare decisions made throughout a patient's journey are supported by in-vitro diagnostics—tests that are completed using blood, tissue or urine. Laboratories and the diagnostic results they generate every day—many operating 24/7—make a profound difference in people's lives.

As a leading developer and producer of medical tests and digital tools, Roche Diagnostics' North America headquarters in Indianapolis works in partnership with laboratories to provide the results clinicians need to deliver the best care to patients. With vacancy in specialized labs hovering at 13% across U.S. hospitals, staff shortages are the No. 1 issue facing laboratories today. More concerning, the situation is projected to worsen as the demand for medical laboratory technologists and technicians is expected to increase by 11% between 2020 and 2030.

Analyzing the factors driving this labor shortage, we turn once again to the pandemic, which accelerated worker retirements in many industries. Specific to the laboratory workforce, new training requirements driven by more complex testing have caused some lab technicians to leave the profession. Overall in training and education, the number of accredited laboratory training programs has decreased by 25% over the past 30 years, and fewer academic programs exist to provide this specialized training. To put this in perspective, the profession is currently educating less than half of the laboratory professionals needed to meet demand.

The value that laboratories contribute to clinical decision-making is critical to the future of healthcare and enables people to live longer, healthier lives. As a partner in medical diagnostics, Roche is investing in both near-term and long-term solutions to address lab staffing shortages and increase laboratory efficiency.

Today, through Roche's commitment to deliver operational simplicity, we help laboratories streamline their operations, eliminating the time lab professionals spend on redundant tasks. These automated solutions are not intended to replace skills or jobs; on the contrary, in resource-constrained laboratory environments, they allow specialized staff to focus on high-value activities that require more expertise. Automation solutions that free up time also enable staff to develop new job skills and engage in professional development, both of which contribute to job satisfaction and workforce retention. As we work to reduce the volume of tests going to centralized labs and make testing more accessible to patients, we are also continuing to invest in the expansion of more point-of-care solutions. These tests, conducted near the patient or at the point of care (e.g., at the bedside, clinician's office, emergency department, pharmacy, urgent care) provide quick turnaround times and accuracy along with other benefits for both patients and providers.

Revisiting the conditions that led to the current staffing shortages, we know this situation didn't happen overnight. The same can be said for resolving it. Addressing the root cause of this labor challenge requires building a pipeline of potential workers interested in and excited about a rewarding career in healthcare and diagnostics. This begins with raising public awareness of the role that medical diagnostics play in our lives. We got a running start with this awareness-building during the pandemic when "PCR testing" became a household phrase. From here, it will be up to businesses, educational institutions and community organizations to connect with middle and high school students—our future workforce—to promote the value of careers in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) and to introduce young people to these opportunities and the skills it takes to be successful in these fields.

To this end, we at Roche are collaborating with organizations such as Project Lead the Way and Junior Achievement to offer experiential learning opportunities to middle- and high-school students. Roche's Accelerated Development Program offers new college graduates an



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Brad joined Roche in October 2016 as the Head of Diabetes Care North America, where he was responsible for all aspects of Roche's diabetes business in the U.S. and Canada.

opportunity to explore different areas within Roche to help identify their right career path. At the college level, we've partnered with the University of Indianapolis to create the Roche Academy. College students complete a paid summer internship with Roche, in which they receive work-based experiences in the life sciences industry and specialized training. Students successfully completing the program receive financial and educational incentives, including an opportunity for placement in early-career roles at the end of their summer internship.

It is vitally important to both individual and community health to generate interest in careers in medical diagnostics and, more broadly, in life sciences. Diagnostic

testing not only provides patients and clinicians with the answers needed to tackle today's healthcare challenges, but also the power to shift our healthcare mindset toward prevention and early intervention. Continuing to address laboratory staff shortages helps ensure healthcare providers and patients have the information they need to move forward in their journeys to better health. With this in mind, it is essential that the future workforce is introduced early and receives the necessary education for valuable careers in STEAM, specifically medical diagnostics, to ensure that patients in generations to come receive the care they need. ●

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