



Melanie A. Osby, MD, FCAP

Director of Microbiology in the Department of Pathology
Los Angeles County University of Southern California Medical Center

When in Doubt, Try Getting Out

You'll never know about the relationship issues unless you actively pursue being seen.

Melanie A. Osby, MD, FCAP, has been talking about the satisfaction of her work as Director of Microbiology in the Department of Pathology at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center where she completed her AP/CP residency and Surgical Pathology Fellowship.

She has described a close network of 90 full-time faculty-physician scientists, 34 residents, and a half-dozen fellows in her department, the partnerships with clinical specialists and researchers, and the collegial give and take.

Then you ask her about one-on-one contact with patients.

"For the most part, I'm not one-on-one with patients," Dr. Osby said. "That's why I have another job."

A bit more probing and she owns up to two more jobs: one as National Medical Director of HemaCare Corp, a national blood donor center that provides blood products and therapeutic apheresis services for hospitals across Southern California, New York, Maine and other States on the East Coast, and another as Medical Director for CordBancUSA, a private cord blood bank based in Monterey, California.

"It's the total package," she said. "I get to do all the Transfusion Medicine outside, and I get to do the Micro and resident teaching here."

Each pathologist in the clinical laboratory at LAC+USC has an area of specialization, and multidisciplinary thinking is part of the culture.

Pathologists are heavily involved with clinicians in their areas of expertise.

"The clinicians come to you and ask your opinion on a lot of things that relate to the clinical part of patient care," Dr. Osby said. "We are very active and very present to our clinical colleagues; that was the way I was also trained at Cedars-Sinai."

It was as a fellow in Transfusion Medicine at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles that Dr. Osby embraced what would prove to be, in her words, "the love of my [professional] life."

"It had its own apheresis unit, where we were responsible for writing the patients' orders and coordinating the patient care as part of the whole team," she said. "So you had a lot of interaction with the patient." And direct patient care, she said, is something that she very quickly "got used to."

Her current work with HemaCare features lots of give-and-take with blood donors, patients, nurses, and physicians. For example, platelet donors with questions about side effects from anticoagulants (numbness and tingling are not uncommon), bruising, and other issues will contact her directly.

"I love oversight of the blood bank, the donor room, and the therapeutic apheresis service," she said.

The HemaCare position also involves presentations in the community to recruit donors for their sickle cell disease donation program as well as therapeutic apheresis. Talks for churches and other community groups, she felt, were not PowerPoint-friendly settings.

"I thought I could do a lot better," she said. So she signed up for a College of American Pathologists' CME course to improve communications skills.

"The training helps you to be a little more focused, to hone in on the audience and see whether you have their attention, and to try another approach if you don't," she said. "I think it was the best thing I could have done."

The training built skills and confidence, which Dr. Osby has also found useful for grand rounds, nurses' meetings, and departmental sit-downs.

She meets with clinicians and nursing staff whenever circumstances warrant, as when a pattern of insufficient sampling is forcing the lab to cancel specimens or return negative results with an "interpret with caution" caveat. This educates, creates friendships, and strengthens the feedback loop.

"You have to be visible," she said. "You'll never know about the subtle issues clinicians have with your laboratory unless you actively pursue being seen. Then they will come to you. You won't have to ask; they'll tell you."

Note: There is still time to [sign up for the "High Impact Communications Made Easy"](#) ST104 on Monday, October 12 during CAP '09. If you would like to improve your communications skills, the CAP has what you need when you need it! Registration is open at cap2009.org.