

Phlebotomy

Phlebotomy requires more than just skills in drawing blood. Communication expertise is needed and increasingly staff are performing diagnostic tests. And yet, they don't they have a recognised training standard. Kirsty Osei-Bempong reports.

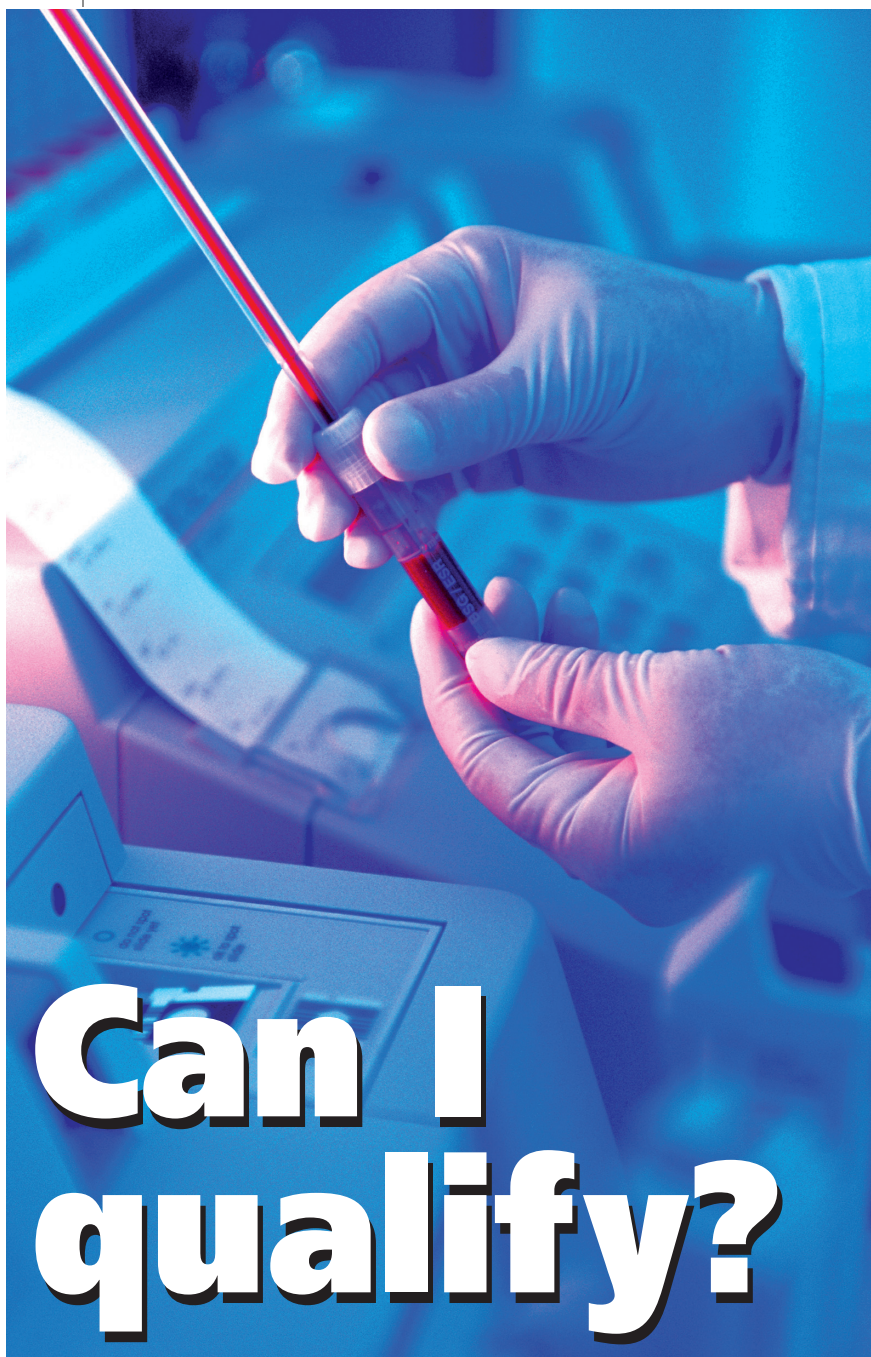
Left: Processing blood samples is a new aspect to the role of the phlebotomist

On 6 April 1999, phlebotomist Elaine Giorgi of San Mateo in California was fired from her job after admitting to reusing needles on patients while drawing blood. What followed was a huge public outcry and lengthy investigations by the state and county departments. This case not only brought to light the unhygienic practice of reusing needles but also prompted the US state to adopt phlebotomy regulations into law in 2003. While this case is, thankfully, in the minority, its implications extend wider than just the US.

In this country, a prospective phlebotomist needs only to have a good general education and comply with the National Occupational Standards (NOS) to begin a career in phlebotomy. No standardised formal training exists for phlebotomists, although a range of GCSEs is viewed as an advantage. Training is usually on-the-job and can vary depending on the NHS trust hospital doing the hiring, says Cathy Williams, president of the National Association of Phlebotomists (NAP). "It is pot luck across the country. The training you receive depends on the hospital. There are some where trainees will be put in an outpatients department with no background theory, then let loose within hours of observation. Untrained staff performing an invasive procedure – that's scary," she says.

Learning on the job

Williams, who gained her phlebotomy training while working as a biomedical scientist, now manages the phlebotomy departments at Barnet & Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust and stipulates that potential applicants are given a written test, receive theory and are given practical training. Her requirements mirror many of those currently required in the US and Australia. She does not let anyone go out and work unless they've done at least 50 venepunctures. "And then we don't say that they are fit to work as a phlebotomist. To me, they are then



Can I qualify?

only fit to work as trainee phlebotomists under supervision. I wouldn't want them to go and work for an agency until they'd had more practical experience."

But, if training standards are not the same across the country, explains Williams, there is every chance that standards can slip and problems start. "I don't think people realise that phlebotomy is a skill and a skill needs practice. It is no good sending someone for a course if they do not have the opportunity to practise it."

She certainly takes issue to the fact that many trainee doctors coming from abroad use the profession as a 'stepping stone' into medicine and raises concern that the true skill and competence in performing this invasive procedure is not recognised by all.

It is these issues that have galvanised the NAP's campaign to develop a national standard. "We actually wanted professional recognition and a regulation for phlebotomists some years back but got turned down by the Health Professions Council (HPC) on

the grounds that it did not want to regulate a profession that only did a single function," she says. She also believes that because no issues have come to light, as yet, for example a hospital being sued for poorly administering a venepuncture, the needs of the profession have been, "put on the back burner." Williams adds: "Because phlebotomist staff turnover is so high, you've got to rely on people staying in the job and pushing through issues to lobby change."

National survey

So does it take a national tragedy to occur to bring about change? Williams does not think so, which is why, this time around, impetus for the development of a phlebotomy national vocational qualification (NVQ) has come from a pool of the UK's estimated 3,500 phlebotomists, who took part in the NAP's survey. The aim of the study was to provide 'significant evidence' to the HPC to help the association achieve professional recognition and implement