

The Massachusetts Society for Medical Research

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Survey Highlights Staffing Needs, Gaps in Laboratory Animal Care Workforce

Lack of trained graduates could impact rate and growth of biomedical research in Mass.

NORTH CHELMSFORD, MA – June 26, 2008 – A new study by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) highlights the risks to biomedical research in Massachusetts if there are not enough workers specially skilled in providing care to laboratory animals.

The study was commissioned by the Massachusetts Society for Medical Research (MSMR) and used in-depth interviews and data from an expert survey of 51 organizations that operate laboratory animal care facilities in the region. UMDI concluded that our schools and colleges are not producing enough trained graduates to keep up with demand and that as the Life Sciences industry grows in Massachusetts, the disparity between needed staff and available workers will widen.

Research is at the heart of Life Sciences and animal studies are fundamental to the creation of **new medical advancements**. About half of all biomedical research in the Commonwealth requires animal studies and such research employs about 20,000 workers in Massachusetts' universities, medical centers, and biotechnology, pharmaceutical and medical device firms. And yet, according to Federal estimates, fewer than 2,400 workers here specialize in laboratory animal care. Over the next three years alone, UMDI data predicts turnover rates of more than 18%, and growth of more than 12%, amounting to hundreds of positions to be filled.

“The long-term effect of staffing shortages could be a slow-down in biomedical research in the state, or the loss of research to other more competitive regions,” said Dr. Steven M. Niemi, Board Chair of MSMR. “In some parts of the country, laboratory animal careers are more strongly promoted and specialized training is more broadly available than in Massachusetts.”

Jobs in laboratory animal facilities range from entry-level animal husbandry technicians, to skilled veterinary technicians, to veterinarians specially trained in laboratory animal medicine. There are also managers and directors with senior operational responsibility. A previous UMDI Life Sciences study indicated that some of these animal care positions recently had higher vacancy rates than physicians, engineers and IT professionals.

“This report highlights the critical role animal technicians play in the drug development process as well as the dire need to recruit, develop and train individuals in this field,” said Ross Gibson, Corporate Vice President, Human Resources, North America, at Charles River. “As a global industry leader, with more than 1,300 employees in Massachusetts, we are committed to developing and training employees interested in science careers. Our on-the-job training and career advancement programs help promote interest in this field but it will take the collective resources of the Massachusetts Life Sciences industry to help solve this issue.”

Spurred by our region's depth of biomedical research organizations, venture investors, and thought leaders, the Massachusetts Life Sciences industry currently employs 84,000 in its core sectors, and more when the associated employment sectors are included. This vital workforce is projected to grow steadily (about 1.3% per year) through 2014, despite shrinkage in other parts of the state's economy.

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The UMDI study revealed that when faced with a shortage of qualified animal care workers, employers have few options:

- Leave positions vacant and add to the workload to other employees. Because of stringent regulations governing animal care in research facilities, it is not feasible simply to leave a direct animal care position unfilled.
- Hire employees with less than the needed skills and try to fill the training gap themselves
- Hire temporary or contract staff
- Recruit outside the region, which is difficult because of our high cost of living.

All organizations already use some combination of these tactics, but smaller organizations are more vulnerable because they often don't have the bench depth to parcel out extra work or to train on-site.

Industry Efforts at Training and Career Growth

The Life Sciences sector in the state is working hard on this problem: 95% offer informal and 74% offer formal in-house training to get and keep their animal care staffs prepared.

To help employees improve and strengthen their careers:

- 83% give release time for employees to attend national meetings
- More than 75% pay for professional society membership fees, certification training programs, and national and local professional society meetings
- Over half give salary incentives for certification
- 49% offer English as a Second Language

These strategies help people who are *already* employed. Informing and training new skilled workers is also essential. Here, a coordinated effort among our high schools, community colleges and public colleges and universities, as well as private institutions of higher learning will be critical.

Hidden Opportunities

A principal hurdle to hiring is there is not enough knowledge about laboratory animal care jobs among students and potential employees. Yet, many of the same skills animal husbandry technicians and veterinary technicians learn would transfer immediately to the laboratory animal setting from the veterinary clinic. The additional skills could be taught readily in a properly equipped community college: 92% of the survey respondents saw it as beneficial for the community colleges to offer specialized training and certification classes for laboratory animal care workers.

State agencies that offer job counseling and re-training programs to displaced workers, adults re-entering the workforce, and recent arrivals in our state also have an opportunity to introduce laboratory animal care much more widely to potential employees. The jobs tend to be better rewarded and include more benefits than comparable work in other fields.

MSMR and its members will use the The UMass Donahue Institute study results to introduce training and recruitment program recommendations to the biomedical research industry and as the basis for proposals to educators and the Department of Workforce and Labor Development.

The Massachusetts Society for Medical Research promotes and enhances biomedical and biological research, including the humane care and use of animals, for the improved health and well-being of people, animals, and the environment. MSMR is dedicated to fostering a better understanding of biomedicine by improving basic literacy in and enthusiasm for the biological sciences among the public, the media, and future generations.

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Note to Editors: The UMass Donahue Institute Report (82 pages) and the Executive Summary (3 pages) are available from MSMR. E-mail Alan Dittrich at a.dittrich@msmr.org. Interviews with animal facility managers, students and veterinarians, can be arranged.

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