

No mad scientists here

By Robin E. Stomblor

"No mad scientists need apply," screamed the publicity announcement from the American Proficiency Institute (API) about the scholarship program API inaugurated last year. The organization hoped to attract the best and brightest medical-technology students to continue in the laboratory science professions. Nearly 300 college juniors and seniors applied for five awards.

"We wanted to do our part to support the laboratory," explains Daniel C. Edson, API president. "The caliber and commitment of the students was so impressive that we decided to continue the program this year." For 2009, API will be offering five more student scholarships of \$2,000 each. For application information, please see www.api-pt.com or the API Facebook page.

Who are these laboratory professionals of the future? Here is a glimpse into the aspirations of two API 2008 award winners, Tena Ewing and Diego Solano.

Stomblor: How did you become interested in the clinical laboratory? What has been your best course – and why?

Ewing: At 12, my daughter developed hypertension. I decided to go back to school to learn more about how to help her. My intention was to pursue a degree in nutrition. When I signed up at school, I saw by happenstance a pamphlet for the med-tech program and decided to pursue that instead. Microbiology and blood bank are my favorites. These disciplines seem more hands-on; although in hematology, doing differentials can be a challenge, too.

Solano: In high school, my science teacher was a phlebotomist and medical technologist. She taught us all about microbiology. I fell in love with micro because of all her stories on leukocytes, microorganisms, blood draws, and the importance of diagnosing patients. She told me about medical-technology school. I went to college majoring in biomedical sciences and then attended medical-laboratory science school. Microbiology is my love because it is so different, especially working with cultures. Two cultures of *E coli* can mean completely different things. My attention to fine detail and the day-to-day differences all make the work exciting.

Stomblor: The need for more laboratory professionals has been discussed for years now. What can we do to attract more students into the profession?

Ewing: I am not sure what is being done in high schools, but once I did not even realize there was such a program. We need to get out to the high schools and let the students know about these clinical laboratory sciences programs, like the one at the University of Massachusetts. We should also attend the educational trade shows and encourage science teachers to discuss this career option in high school classes. Kids love hands-on activities, so we should promote the laboratory as hands-on. There is so much theory behind clinical laboratory science, but the hands-on is a very attractive component.

Solano: Just getting out there and making students aware of the program, especially at the beginning of college. Particularly

in these hard economic times, this is a growing profession. Once students learned about the medical technology program, they were interested, but most did not have the initial course requirements completed. Friends in college wanted to pursue the medical field but did not want to complete the years of training for an MD degree. If they had been aware of the clinical laboratory careers earlier, they could have avoided making last-minute course decisions. Many people do not even know what a medical technologist is. I often have to explain, "You go to the doctor and he requires your blood, urine, or sputum for tests. Well, that is what I do: the tests!" There needs to be more education about the professions now. For career days at colleges, organizations like ASCLS, CLMA, and others should get out there and let people know of this great opportunity. My school in Denver had a great way of getting the word out and explaining what we do. Hospitals need assistance in the laboratory and need to advertise more. Frankly, everyone has a bit of responsibility for getting people interested. Even getting people from the local community to tour the laboratory and see what we do would be helpful.

Stomblor: Now that you have come to the end of your studies and experienced the laboratory first-hand, what would you have liked to learn more about? Are you currently working in a laboratory? If so, what are you doing, and where do you see yourself professionally in five years?

Ewing: At the University of Massachusetts, we had a great program. We learned about so many different things; they pretty much covered everything. As I focus on microbiology, maybe I will need more in-depth information. The microbiology lab of the Lahey Clinic recently hired me. The people there are great and most have been there for years. I would like to work between micro and molecular. There is so much new information coming out in molecular, so much more to learn and accomplish. I really can never stop going to school. Through the coming years, I can see taking one class a semester.

Solano: Molecular is where the profession is headed, and I would have liked to have had more background in this area. We had just a brief introduction to it in med-tech school. I did learn about PCR in a previous job. I am currently working in the microbiology department at the University of Colorado hospital. I would like to become a more competent medical technologist and stay in microbiology. In the future, med techs will need to understand diseases and the human response to diseases, as well as how machinery works and how to troubleshoot machinery. We need to factor in the technology component in the future. The field is headed for more automation. □

Robin Stomblor, president of Auburn Health Strategies LLC, works with corporate leaders, association and government executives, and entrepreneurs to maximize ideas and advance products and services. She has more than a decade of experience representing the laboratory community.