Use of Physician Extenders in Surgical Pathology Practice: the Pathology Assistant

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**Background.** Changes in health care economics and organization have resulted in increase use of non-physician providers in most health care setting. Use of a variety of technical and nursing professionals with advanced competence in NHS has been debated in Italy since 1999 (l. 42/99) and in many specialties new physician extenders have been developed. Regarding surgical pathology, in USA and Canada, the use of physician extenders, Pathologists’ Assistants whose expertise lies in gross examination of surgical specimens, is common.
Methods. Literature review.

Results. Pathology Assistant is a laboratory professional who, through appropriately documented delegation by a pathologist of specific responsibilities for which he has been properly trained, performs a comprehensive gross examination of surgical specimens (1-2-3). The use of Pathology Assistant has been measured to examine the impact on laboratory efficiency and quality (4).
Specifically, the Pathology Assistant performance in lymph node retrieval from a sample of axillary dissection and colorectal specimens was equivalent or superior to pathology residents. In hospital setting, is documented improvement of lymph node yield in colorectal surgical specimen with a pathology assistant (5).
Then, are there a role and a need for appropriately trained and certified non-medical personnel (Pathology Assistant) to assist pathologists in the preparation and examination of tissue in the setting of surgical pathology in Italy? Naturally the practice of pathology is an integral part of medical care, it entails the diagnosis of disease and often is the single most important factor upon which decisions regarding therapy are made.
These responsibilities must remain those of a certified pathologist. The delegation of responsibilities to pathology assistant in gross specimens examination should be similar to that given to histotechnologists who prepare histological slides and perform other specialized techniques. This particular delegation should always be performed under the close supervision of a qualified pathologist.
In this way, the use of Pathology Assistant save pathologists time to perform other necessary functions. For achieving quality in surgical pathology, pathologists need a system of subspecialisation (6-7) to play a role in clinical pathways with multidisciplinary management of the patient (8).
Despite increases in surgical pathology service time for many pathologists during the last several years, there is continuing pressure to improve pathology services (decreasing turnaround times and lowering costs) from other providers and health care organizations in managed care system (9). Workforce modifications have been one response to managed care pressures in many specialty practices.
References:


