Frequently Asked Questions About Surgical Technology and the Surgical Technology Program

Is Surgical Technology a job with a future?

Yes! It has a future due to the growth potential of the profession and it has been growing for a number of years. The “Occupational Outlook Handbook” is published by the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and states, “Employment of surgical technologists is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations. Job opportunities will be best for technologists who are certified. Employment of surgical technologists is expected to grow 25% between 2008 – 2018; much faster than the average for all occupations, as the volume of surgeries increases.” The number of surgical procedures is expected to rise as the population grows and ages. Older people, including the baby boom generation, who generally require more surgical procedures, will account for a larger portion of the general population. Technological advances, such as fiber optics and laser technology, will permit an increasing number of new surgical procedures to be performed and also will allow surgical technologists to assist with a greater number of procedures.” However, due to the recent challenges in the economy, as with most jobs, the health professions have seen some slowing in job growth. Individuals entering any health profession need to realize that the job search is going to require concentrated effort in order to land that first position.

Where can I find information about surgical technology job earnings?

The Association of Surgical Technologists (AST) provides a salary map on its web site: http://www.ast.org/professionals/professionals_about_prof_stats.aspx At the top of the page click on the link to the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook where more salary information can be found.

Is there an opportunity for advancement in the field of ST?

Yes. Some health care facilities have “clinical ladders” which allow the CST to gain experience and have the opportunity to move up the clinical ladder to reflect the level of experience that has been gained over time and possibly be provided with additional responsibilities. Some CSTs gain supervisory/management positions in particular in the medical sales field and central sterile supply department. CSTs may choose to learn the surgical first assistant roles and duties and achieve the CSFA credential. The National Board of Surgical Technology & Surgical Assisting (www.nbtsa.org) provides the routes for establishing eligibility to take the surgical first assistant national certification examination. The Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (www.caahep.org) lists accredited surgical technology and surgical first assistant programs.
How many hours a week do surgical technologists work? What about over time?

Usually STs work a 40-hour week and the employer provides benefits including vacation with the number of days decided on the length of employment at the facility. Overtime depends on the size of the health care facility. Large hospitals may have 1-2 shifts, day and evening, and the evening shift is usually responsible for finishing up the regularly scheduled surgical procedures that may not have been completed by the end of the day shift and handling the emergency procedures that often occur during the night; so there may not be too much overtime or emergency call for the CST. However, in smaller rural hospitals there may only be 2-3 CSTs and therefore overtime may occur as well as taking on emergency call on a more frequent basis which is also considered overtime.

What type of education is needed to be qualified as a surgical technologist?

Surgical technology programs are either a one-year certificate program or 2-year associate degree program. The difference between the 1- and 2-year programs is that the individual is required to complete additional general education courses such as math, English, and sociology or psychology coursework within an associate degree program. However, no matter the length of the program, the student will still learn the same core surgical technology knowledge in the classroom and lab, and be required to complete a surgical rotation.

Of all the subjects studied in school, which ones do surgical technologists use most on the job?

This is a difficult question to answer because all of the surgical technology knowledge a student learns is integrated and put into use in the operating room. One course that is highly necessary is Human Anatomy & Physiology. This is a core course that the student must understand and be able to recall the information during their entire career as a surgical technologist.

Is any type of apprenticeship/internship program required for ST students?

Yes, students are required to complete a surgical clinical rotation. The student is assigned a preceptor on a daily basis who oversees the training of the student in the operating room. The student starts out performing the role of the surgical technologist on fairly simple minor procedures and, during the course of the rotation, advances to more difficult procedures in a variety of surgical specialties.
**What is most enjoyable about the job?**

If surgical technology is the right career for you, you will find it very rewarding. You will assist on surgical procedures that few others even get to observe. It is unlikely a day will go by that you do not learn something new. If you are willing to challenge yourself by learning a variety of cases and specialties, you will find that your interest level will remain high and you will prove to be a valuable employee. You will develop your ability to think independently during fast paced and challenging situations. Most importantly, you have the opportunity to participate as part of a team providing quality and safe care to surgical patients.

**What type of people are encountered in the daily routine of a ST?**

Surgery is a high stress environment that tends to attract Type A personalities which can sometimes lend to tense moments both in and out of the operating room. Like any place of employment where you see the same people day-in-and-day-out, workplace conflicts can occur – but that is when individuals need to show some maturity and work out the difficulty in a professional manner. Overall, everyone is there to work as a team towards the goal of delivering safe, quality surgical patient care.

**What are the primary locations of work for the surgical technologist?**

Most surgical technologists work in the operating room at health care facilities from small hospitals to large medical centers; physicians’ clinic; or ambulatory surgery centers. There are surgical technologists that work in related areas of surgery including anesthesia technician and central sterile supply, as well as alternative areas of employment such as veterinarian technicians and medical sales representatives.

**Are there specialties in the profession? Other career options?**

Some surgical technologists may specialize in a specific surgical specialty such as orthopedic surgery, neurosurgery, or ophthalmic surgery. For the most part, the majority of surgical technologists are expected to know how to assist the surgeon in all types of procedures in all the surgical specialties. Depending on the goals of the individual there are other career options, some of which require attaining a higher degree such as associate or bachelor level. Options include educator/instructor in a surgical technology program (colleges often require a higher degree as a condition of employment); medical sales representative (higher degree may be required); surgical first assistant; supervisor/manager such as for a central sterile supply department (may require higher degree and some years as a surgical technology practitioner).
Are there other professional credentials that are of benefit to a surgical technologist?

Surgical specialty credentials are not offered by the NBSTSA or any other organization. The CST and CSFA credentials discussed in other sections of this document are the primary credentials in the surgical technology and surgical first assisting professions. One credential that is popular with surgical technologists is the Certified Registered Central Service Technician (CRCST) that is offered by the International Association of Healthcare Central Service Materiel Management (IAHCSMM; http://www.iahcsmm.org).

Does AST have information as to the average length of time individuals stay in the profession?

Based AST survey information, the majority of individuals stay in the profession an average of 10 – 12 years. However, there are indicators that the CSTs are starting to stay in the profession longer, up to 15 years as the average.

Are there other professional organizations that are of benefit to the CST?

If the CST acquires the CRCST credential, he/she may also want to be a member of IAHCSMM since that is the professional organization that represents the central sterile supply technicians. Additionally, if the CST earns the CSFA credential he/she is encouraged to join the Association of Surgical Assistants (ASA), the partner organization of AST that represents the surgical first assistants.

What are the continuing education requirements in order to renew the CST credential? How is continuing education important to the CST?

The certification cycle is 4 years; the CST must complete 60 continuing education (CE) credits during the cycle in order to renew the credential. The CST submits the CE documentation to AST for processing and recording. AST maintains a CE file for the member; the non-member is required to submit their CE documentation towards the end of the 4-year cycle and also pay the $400 non-member CE processing fee.

CE credits can be earned through a variety of methods such as attending health care facility/surgery department in-services; attending AST live events such as the Annual National Conference; completing AST on-line CE articles; attend your AST state assembly meetings; certain college courses are accepted for CE credits; and attend conferences offered by physician’s organizations such as the American College of Surgeons.

Continuing education is important to all health professions. It demonstrates to patients, peers, other health care professionals, and the public that the CST is maintaining as well as advancing their knowledge in order to continue to provide quality, safe surgical patient care. With the rapid changes and progress in technology and surgical procedure techniques, the CST should have a high sense of duty towards the surgical patient to remain current in his/her knowledge of surgery and patient care.
How important is certification and AST membership?

Even though certification is not required by every employer or state, it is important to be accountable to the public and patients by remaining certified to demonstrate that you have the requisite knowledge and skills to work with the surgical team in providing quality surgical patient care. Additionally, surveys demonstrate the CST generally makes a better wage than the non-certified surgical technologist. Two more important points – more and more employers over the years have required certification as a condition of employment and currently eight states have legislation in place requiring the CST credential as a condition of employment: Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. AST continues to work on its legislative efforts to have this legislation passed in more states, so it only makes sense to get certified and not be left behind. Just as with certification, AST membership is important. It is the national organization that represents CSTs on a daily basis to employers, legislators, public, patients and other health care providers. Member Benefits can be found on the AST web site. AST continuing education offerings help by advancing surgical technologists knowledge with the goal of improving the members’ ability to provide quality surgical patient care. Also of importance is ASTs legislative efforts on the behalf of the membership as well as the publishing of the profession’s own Standards of Practice.