

# Bill takes aim at tech certification

[By Jennifer Huberdeau](#)

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NORTH ADAMS -- When patients enter the operating room, it's with the assumption that everyone on the surgical team is board certified.

But in Massachusetts, and many other states in the nation, there's no law requiring the surgical technologists -- who do everything from sterilize the medical equipment to suctioning and holding retractors -- to undergo proper training.

Tom Lescarbeau, a certified surgical technologist who teaches at C.H. McCann Technical School's post-secondary program, is hoping a bill currently in the state Senate, co-sponsored by state Sen. Benjamin Downing, D-Pittsfield, will change that.

"As hospitals look to cut costs, it's becoming more commonplace that hospitals are hiring people without any training for this position," Lescarbeau, president of the Massachusetts Association of Surgical Technologists, said on Thursday. "In talking with colleagues from around the state, we found that it's happening more frequently -- in our state and around the country."

While he acknowledged that the hospitals in Berkshire County not only employ certified surgical technologists, but also work in tandem with McCann's rigorous nine-month hands-on training program, Lescarbeau said the legislation ultimately protects both patients and hospitals.

"Operating rooms are increasingly becoming technologically advanced -- this legislation will protect the patients, while also increasing quality patient care," he said.

The primary responsibility of a surgical technologist is to maintain the sterile field and prepare the instruments and supplies for surgical procedures. This involves knowledge of anatomy, physiology, microbiology pharmacology, and pathophysiology, he said.

"Surgical techs hold retractors and assist with suction. There are also two tasks that really prompt formal training -- the handling of medications that are used directly for surgery and the labeling of specimens," Lescarbeau said. "If the process is not carried out in a certain way, it can affect the patient's diagnosis and treatment. Unfortunately, there have been cases where this has happened."

In January 2009, the Massachusetts Association for Surgical Technologists mobilized a grass-roots campaign, joining many other state groups pushing for legislative oversight. "It's amazing when you talk to legislators about this -- they just assume that everyone in health care is regulated," Lescarbeau said. "Sen. Ben Downing was very responsive and co-sponsored Senate Bill 797."

The bill seeks to "ensure the proper training of surgical technologists by accredited institutions, enhance the safety of patients in the operating room and lower health care costs by lowering the risk of surgical errors." It also protects current surgical technologists by grandfathering in individuals who have been working that capacity before January 1, 2010.

According to Downing's office, the senator also testified in favor of the bill before the senate's Public Health Committee in July, stating the "tasks [of surgical technologists] are daunting and potentially dangerous, and yet they remain the only members of the operating team whose profession is not regulated."

The bill has yet to emerge from the Public Health Committee.

"In Berkshire County, we're ahead of the curve," Lescarbeau said. "But we want all hospitals to follow the same rules. The board certification process is already in place, all of the 450 education programs around the country already require board certification of their graduates as part of the accreditation process."

To reach Jennifer Huberdeau,  
e-mail [jhuberdeau@thetranscript.com](mailto:jhuberdeau@thetranscript.com).