

Pathologists' Assistants productivity – a new way to look at the numbers

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Abstract

Pre-existing productivity monitoring methods of assessing number of specimens grossed or number of blocks submitted are no longer granular enough in a milieu of Pathologists' Assistants (PA) grossing different types of specimens of varying complexities and performing other operational tasks. Workload capture in the gross lab should be consistent and accurate not only to submit accurate figures to finance but also in order to provide administrative staff with data that is useful in assessing how many PAs they need to accommodate specimen volumes. Capturing workload using real time, bench level entry of unit values from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), Management Information System (MIS) standards by the unit producing personnel (UPP) will allow for more accurate and consistent capture. Interfacing this method with actual time worked by PAs provides the individual and leadership the ability to assess their productivity.

Keywords competency assessment; grossing; Pathologists' Assistants; productivity; workload

Introduction

The laboratory's ability to capture accurate workload allows them to fund and staff themselves appropriately. Whereas the other laboratories have moved from a more complex testing platform (manual) to a more simple platform (automation) the pathology laboratory has transitioned from medical staff (pathologists) to Pathologists' Assistants (PAs) who are unit producing personnel (UPP) grossing specimens.

The role of the PA in Canada has changed dramatically since their introduction in the early 1970's. Originally technical staff stood alongside the pathologist, took notes and closed cassettes as the pathologist placed tissue in them. In the next phase PAs were responsible for the gross description and dissection of some of the simple specimens. Currently PAs gross the majority if not all the specimens that come through the pathology department. Many institutions employ more than one PA each of whom may have a different background and training ranging from no medical laboratory experience to a Master's degree specific to the role of the PA, with different roles and responsibilities assigned to each.

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Workload capture for grossing has not kept up with changes in the environment. Even the histology laboratory who are accustomed to capturing technical workload were unaccustomed to capturing workload for the function of grossing as it was traditionally a task assigned to medical staff and was poorly understood. Many Ontario hospital pathology labs capture workload for grossing using the values from the Workload Measurement System (WMS) developed by Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). Pre 2009 these values assigned 4 minutes to grossing a specimen no matter what type of specimen it was. You could also add another 4 minutes for assisting with the gross. These values did not take into account additional activities at the gross bench such as photography which were usually added as an inaccurate afterthought, if at all.

Workload units are values attributed to the work done by UPP as defined by CIHI. CIHI is an independent non-profit organization that provides essential information on Canada's healthcare system and the health of Canadians. CIHI set national standards (MIS) used across the healthcare system to collect and report financial and statistical data from health service organizations' daily operations. The WMS is a tool for measuring the volume of activity provided by a specific functional centre (in our case, clinical laboratories-histology) in terms of a standardized unit of time. This gives lab leadership a good indication of the amount and kind of services provided in terms of productivity, utilization and financial indicators.

Productivity is more and more important as administrators try to balance their budgets and maintain services, such as staffing gross labs vacated by pathologists, and plan for institutional program changes. The method described was originally started as accurate capture of workload but it soon became apparent that PA productivity could also be realized from the data. Previous attempts to capture PA productivity using block and specimen counts are not appropriate as they do not take into consideration the complexity of the work being done.

Materials and methods

When the Laboratory Information System (LIS) was updated for the new billing codes (Figure 1) it included an area where the billing can be added at the bench level for the PAs.

The PAs use voice recognition software to enter their workload into the computer for every specimen they handle. The workload values (expressed as "workload units") are available as a table in the document control system, where 1 workload unit is equal to 1 minute of time.

Table 1 reflects all types of workload that can be captured during gross dissection and description and the item for count (i.e. whether it is added to the specimen part type or the entire case (which could be multiple part types)). The table is updated to reflect changes that may occur as a result of updates to the CIHI MIS standards or if the PAs indicate that other types of workload should be captured. The complexity levels 0–5 indicate the degree of complexity for different types of specimen. These have been defined in the CIHI MIS standards. This is the example of Complex 5 specimens (Table 2).

At the monthly PA meeting we have a standing item to discuss specimens that are not included on the complexity lists and

Fee Code(s)	Units	Source	Credit	Billed	Auto
139 HP69890 Filing slides/blocks	1	1			X
140 SP62150 Grossing Complexity 5	1	1			
141 SP62130 Grossing Complexity 3	1	2			
142 SP62090 Distension/Prep	1	2			
143 SP87760 Clinical history	1	2			

Figure 1 Grossing fee codes added by PA.

Commonly used gross billing fee codes and their lookup values

MIS code	Dragon lookup	Activity	Time (minutes)	Item for count
SP62020	Trouble	Trouble shooting	Actual	Part
SP62080	Rounds	Grossing rounds/Consultation	2.9	Case
SP62090	Prep	Distension/Prep	7	Case
SP62100	Complex 0	Grossing complexity 0	1 + 2	Part
SP62110	Complex 1	Grossing complexity 1	1 + 2	Part
SP62120	Complex 2	Grossing complexity 2	5 + 2	Part
SP62130	Complex 3	Grossing complexity 3	10 + 2	Part
SP62140	Complex 4	Grossing complexity 4	15 + 2	Part
SP62130	Complex 5	Grossing complexity 5	37 + 2	Part
SP62130	Handling	Special handling	5	Actual per part
SP62170	Photograph	Photography	5.5	Case
SP69750	Retrieve	Review specimen after gross	8.0	Case
SP96630	Archive	Uploading photograph	1.0	Photo
SP70120	Short history	Review of history in CoPath	0.4	Case
SP90007	Medium history	Review of history in HIS	5	Case
SP87760	Long history	Detailed review of history in HIS	10	Case

Table 1

Complex 5 – Large, complicated – Value 37 (+2 minutes if using voice recognition)

Breast modified radical mastectomy	Cystectomy	Limb (neoplastic)	Pelvic exenteration	Whipple
Chest wall tumour	Jaw resection (neoplastic)	Neck, radical resection	Subcutaneous tissue lesion (neoplastic)	Hepatectomy
Colon segment (neoplastic)	Laryngectomy	Nephrectomy (neoplastic)	Vulvectomy	

Table 2

where they might fit in. If we agree on which complexity the specimen under discussion is then we update the list. If we don't agree then we institute a time study as defined by CIHI¹ to find an average time to complete that type of specimen. Results from the time studies can also be submitted to CIHI in order for them to update their information.

At the end of the month the Senior PA pulls a report developed by the LIS team that shows all the units that each PA has collected during gross description and dissection. The report is pulled using the date, all the classes of specimens received in the lab, the grossing workload (this includes all the MIS codes from Table 1) and the names of the PAs (Figures 2–6).

The report can itemize the data for each PA as it is pulled corresponding to whom completed the gross description (Figure 7).

During the month the senior PA also keeps track of each PA's actual working days by accounting for time lost due to vacation, illness or activities away from the grossing bench (Table 3).

Each PA's units generated from the report are divided by the PA's actual working days to provide an average number of units per day for each PA. We use a working day of 7 hours (8 hours minus 1 hour for lunch and breaks). The average for the group is also calculated. A goal for the group is set at 80% of a 7 hour working day which is 336 minutes.

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