

Lab move boosts collaboration, better health care is ultimate goal

When the director of Marshfield Clinic's reference labs calls the current lab move the biggest thing to happen in the lab in the last 30 years, she's not exaggerating. Beyond the logistics of moving more than 350 employees and the equipment they use, a huge philosophical shift is taking place that will ultimately benefit the Clinic and its patients.

"There are not a lot of places where you can find a building that houses both the clinical lab services and the research labs," said Mary Alice Ketruck, Ph.D., director of reference labs. "The model has been that you keep them separate, because they work differently." The clinical lab people focus on fast and accurate turnaround of test results 24/7. The research staff, by contrast, conceives new ideas, then develops and tests processes to move these new approaches into clinical practice.

"Both of them support our physician population but they do it from different aspects," Dr. Ketruck said.

"What's exciting is that we will have scientists and clinicians working side by side, and thus fostering an environment that accelerates discoveries in research into practice," said Humberto Vidaillet, M.D., director of Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation. "This is consistent with the strategic vision of the Foundation to integrate research into practice and improve clinical practice through research. This building really embodies what we are trying to do on many levels throughout our organization."

The fourth floor of the expanded Laird Center is the most dramatic example of how this will take place. The labs of the Center for Human Genetics and Molecular Pathology will work side by side to help identify the optimal dosage of a drug therapy, based on DNA testing. Molecular pathology staff will work closely with emerging infectious diseases to more rapidly identify infectious agents.

"Frequently in past years, we had to depend on an organism to grow in a culture before we could identify it," Dr. Ketruck said. "The molecular-based testing allows us to identify in a matter of hours what the infectious agent is, giving the physician a greater opportunity to quickly begin the appropriate antimicrobial therapy."

Stephen Wesbrook, Ph.D., deputy director of Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation, said the intent of the expansion project was to provide greater interdisciplinary cooperation and integration in how medical research translates to clinical care.

"Marshfield Clinic's Research Foundation and the Division of Laboratory Medicine work very closely together in many areas on a daily basis," he said. "With respect to the new building, we together wrote the original vision statement and have been in complete agreement on all aspects of its purpose, design and construction. The research and clinical laboratories will share many common resources, creating both operational efficiencies and an environment for the development of new ideas among multiple scientific disciplines."

The Laird Center for Medical Research will also be the place for laboratory education.

"Marshfield Labs is fairly unique in being one of the few laboratory facilities in the country to provide practicum training in as many as seven different student programs," noted Julie Seehafer, lab education program director. Those programs range from a diploma program for phlebotomy technicians to an associate degree program for clinical laboratory technicians, to graduate programs for clinical microbiologists and pathologists' assistants. The Laboratory is also one of a few in the country to hold simultaneous accreditations for the histotechnician, cytotechnology and clinical laboratory science programs.

The labs will be a place where learning and discovery take place, all for one overriding purpose.

"The ultimate goal," said Dr. Ketruck, "is better health care."