

 **Canada's Lifeline:** Our frontline



We're making a difference from behind the scenes.

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Tammy,
Canadian Blood Services
Senior medical laboratory technologist in Ottawa, ON



During the COVID-19 pandemic, we're bringing you stories of our employees who continue to work on the front lines. Tammy Whitteker is a senior medical laboratory technologist in Ottawa, Ont.

I joined Canadian Blood Services more than 25 years ago when it was still the Red Cross. I worked in the stem cell laboratory early in my career and returned to it about a year and a half ago after working in a few other areas.

Stem cell transplants help patients with blood cancer and a variety of other diseases. In this lab we process, test and freeze stem cells that come from both adult donors and umbilical cord blood. Donated cord blood units come here from four hospitals across the country to be added to Canadian Blood Services Cord Blood Bank. Because of the pandemic, cord blood collection is suspended, but our team is still issuing units from the bank for patients who need them. Those units are cryopreserved, which means they are treated and stored at ultra-low temperatures in liquid nitrogen.

On the adult side, we continue to manage stem cells for patients receiving transplants at three different hospitals in Ontario. The transplant could involve a patient's own stem cells, which are collected and transplanted back to them after treatment. Or it could involve stem cells collected from a donor.

'We are standing shoulder to shoulder'

With the transplants from donors, our workload has increased because of the pandemic. Typically those patients would receive their stem cells fresh, even if the cells were arriving from a donor in another country. But now we are processing and cryopreserving those units in addition to the others. This is to make sure they stay viable for the patient if COVID-19 causes any disruption to the plan for their transplant. It's the recommendation from the World Marrow Donor Association.

What makes this work rewarding? We're making a difference from behind the scenes, executing the science to prepare stem cells for transplant. I love my team. We are standing shoulder to shoulder cohesively (figuratively of course!) to make that difference. When there is late delivery of the stem cells to the lab, we'll adjust our schedules to make sure patients get what they need.

'You can throw any type of curveball at a laboratory professional'

Even with the pandemic I have not been anxious about whether our team could deliver for patients. I find that you can throw any type of curveball at a laboratory professional and they have the ability to adjust.

Once the day is done I would normally go to the gym to unwind. These days my children have me hooked on Chloe Ting's 28-day fitness challenge. We do it together. They are way better at it than I am so I have some work to do!