

# THE TRACER METHODOLOGY TOOLKIT FOR LABORATORIES

*Because the tracer is such an important part of a Joint Commission laboratory survey, we've assembled some information to help you and your team conduct your own tracers to help prepare for accreditation and assess your readiness.*

## **We've included:**

- ▶ A worksheet for your team to fill out and of course personalize
- ▶ Tips on how to choose types of tracers to conduct to benefit your lab's needs
- ▶ Items that tend to be non-compliant during survey
- ▶ Frequent questions that are asked in different areas during a tracer

## **MOCK TRACER TRACKING WORKSHEET FOR LABORATORIES**

Use this worksheet to record notes and areas of concern that your team identifies while conducting your organization's mock tracers. This information can be used to highlight a good practice or to determine issues that may require further follow-up. "Yes" or "No" indicates whether the staff member interviewed during the tracer answered the question correctly.

| TRACER QUESTIONS   | YES | NO | FOLLOW-UP NEEDED | COMMENTS OR NOTES |
|--|-----|----|------------------|-------------------|
| Describe your laboratory process to handle transfusion reactions   |     |    |                  |                   |
| What training and orientation have been provided to laboratory staff to handle transfusion reactions?          |     |    |                  |                   |
| What data and analysis have you done on the incidence of transfusion reactions in your organization?           |     |    |                  |                   |
| What measures have you introduced, if any, to reduce the incidence of transfusion reactions?                   |     |    |                  |                   |
| What initial assessment do you perform for new transfusion patients?   |     |    |                  |                   |
| What were the specimen collection requirements for the tests performed for this tracer patient?                |     |    |                  |                   |
| Where were they collected?   |     |    |                  |                   |
| What process did you follow for preparing blood units for this patient's transfusion in an outpatient setting? |     |    |                  |                   |
| What instructions did you provide to this tracer patient?  |     |    |                  |                   |
| What is your laboratory's policy for ordering a stat procedure?  |     |    |                  |                   |
| How do you verify orders for laboratory testing? How do you determine who is authorized to give those orders?  |     |    |                  |                   |
| What is your quality control process? When is corrective action required?                                      |     |    |                  |                   |

Tracer Team Member: \_\_\_\_\_

Tracer Patient or Medical Record: \_\_\_\_\_

Staff Interviewed: \_\_\_\_\_

Unit/Department Where Tracer Was Completed: \_\_\_\_\_

# IMPORTANT TIPS

## IMPORTANT TIPS FOR YOUR TEAM TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING HOW TO DO A TRACER

*The Joint Commission surveyor will, most likely, begin the laboratory tracer with a test result, and then follow the entire testing process for that patient from preanalytic to postanalytic processes. The surveyor may visit all areas of your laboratory that affect the delivery of service, including areas where orders are written or recorded, specimens are collected and processed, testing is performed, and results are documented and communicated.*

**Instead of one person conducting the tracer, consider walking through one as a group.** Having an informal group discussion as the team verbally “traces” through a closed medical record can help laboratory staff to better understand tracers. This is also a good opportunity to discuss possible “workarounds” or other potential problems that could result in a negative outcome.

**Select the medical record of a patient who received multiple laboratory tests, including tests performed at point-of-care sites.**

This will help your team look at multiple processes within your laboratory at one time. Follow the testing from the time of the order to the action taken.

**Consider your laboratory’s past testing activity as a starting point.** It can be very informative to conduct a tracer of past testing activity, particularly if a pattern of near-miss reports or quality control problems with a particular test have been observed.



**Focus on issues of particular concern for process interfaces with clinical staff.** Consider those issues of particular concern, such as patient identification, quality control, and communication of critical test results. Your team can use these specific topics to plan a specialized tracer using a closed medical record.

**Don’t forget to consider the beginning and end of a process, not just the outcome.** For example, while tracking a specimen, make sure that you are following the work done by staff to both collect and then test that specimen. Observe work done with patients. Observe how patient identification is being performed. It is important to remember that tracers can be used to follow an entire process or system, and your team’s goal should be to determine if there are any gaps or potential missteps.

**Consider conducting a tracer when you want to assess any aspect of your systems and processes.** Criteria you might want to consider could be patient sample testing in laboratory sections (hematology, chemistry, biology, blood bank), policy and procedures that guide testing performance of patient samples, maintenance of laboratory equipment, or pre- and post-analytical procedures.

Below are important items to include in your mock tracers because they tend to be top non-compliance issues



### From Employee Files:

- Documentation of education by diplomas, degrees, or transcripts
- Documentation of experience to meet CLIA role qualifications
- 6 month non-waived competency assessment for new employees
- Annual non-waived competency using the 6 methods of evaluation per test system



### For all specialties and subspecialties:

- Proficiency Testing: performance, attestations, staff distribution, and investigations
- Calibration verifications
- Correlations
- Temperature charts
- Maintenance records for all equipment (including pipettes, centrifuges, refrigerators, scales, and timers)

# QUESTIONS

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS THAT OCCUR DURING A LABORATORY TRACER

*A frequent question that laboratorians ask is “what are potential questions that can be asked during a laboratory tracer?” That will depend on who is being interviewed during the tracer. Below are some questions depending on whom is being asked to respond during the tracer.*

### Sample questions for the laboratory staff:

- What were the specimen collection requirements for the tests performed for this tracer patient? Where were they collected?
- What process did you follow for preparing blood units for this patient’s transfusion in an outpatient setting?
- What instructions did you provide to this tracer patient?
- What is your laboratory’s policy for ordering a stat procedure? How do you verify orders for laboratory testing? How do you determine who is authorized to give those orders?
- What is your quality control process? When is corrective action required?
- What is your quality control process for the basic metabolic panel? What is your process for accepting and rejecting a quality control result?
- What is your process when your quality control data reflect a positive or a negative bias based on interlaboratory data? What do you do when your quality control results are higher than acceptable peer data?

### Sample questions for the laboratory director:

- Can you describe your laboratory process to handle transfusion reactions?
- What training and orientation has been provided to laboratory staff to handle transfusion reactions?
- What data and analysis have you done on the incidence of transfusion reactions in your organization?
- What measures have you introduced, if any, to reduce the incidence of transfusion reactions?
- What initial assessment do you perform for new transfusion patients?

### Sample questions for nursing staff:

- What prompted you to suspect a transfusion reaction in this tracer patient?
- What is your policy for addressing a patient exhibiting signs and symptoms of a suspected transfusion reaction?
- What protocol did you follow to address this patient’s continued temperature increase?
- What is your assessment process for a new patient?
- Please describe your entire process for administering blood to a patient.



### Sample questions for blood bank staff:

- What is your organization’s process for handling a new patient?
- What is your documentation process? How is that documentation reported?
- If you have a question or a problem with documentation or necessary information, what do you do?
- When you did not receive the expected sample, what protocol did you follow? Who did you notify about this situation?
- What process did you follow to document or handle an incomplete diagnosis or test result for this patient? Would your processes for daily review have detected this?