

By [Jess Scherman](#) on 04/08/2019



When you envision an operating room, you probably conjure up images of a surgeon with those blue gloves, a patient on the table, maybe a perioperative nurse and some sterile drapes. But doctors and nurses aren't the only important individuals in an operating room (OR) when a patient's life is on the line.

**Surgical technologists** also play a valued role in the OR as they assist with lifesaving procedures. "Even though surgical technologists are not well known as part of the surgery team, we are the backbone of surgery," says Jonathan Fillingane, surgical technologist at **Scripps Mercy Surgery Pavilion**.

This often-overlooked position in the medical field is responsible for some pretty important work. Anyone who is intrigued by the idea of working in the OR, but isn't interested in medical or nursing school, may find their match in a surgical technologist career.

## What are some typical surgical technologist duties?

"Like the center on a football team, the surgical technician's job is not glamorous. But the 'ball' does not move without you," explains George Forleo, surgical tech for **NJ Sharing Network**.

As it becomes evident that these medical professionals are a vital part of the OR team, the question remains: What does a surgical technologist actually do? Read on for a behind-the-scenes look at the surgical technologist duties that take place before, during and after a surgical procedure.

### Pre-surgery duties

"On a daily basis, I begin my day by opening up the sterile processing area and making sure that the autoclaves are working properly," Fillingane says of his position at an ambulatory surgery center.

Prior to surgery, surgical techs receive a list of supplies that will be needed for the upcoming procedure. This list also includes the surgeon's preferences and whether they're right- or left-handed—a detail that determines how the room will be organized.

"I check my caseload of the day by making sure that everything on the preference cards for the surgeon is pulled correctly," Fillingane explains. While the surgical tech prepares the operating room, the nurse and anesthesia technician guide the patient onto the operating table, position him or her correctly and wash the skin around the area where the incision will occur.

The surgical tech's final piece of pre-surgery preparation is to apply sterile drapes around the patient. Fillingane adds that before surgery begins, the team will pause to confirm that they have the correct patient, procedure plan and allergy information to ensure there were no communication errors.

## Duties during surgery

"When your patient comes in, the gears change—and so does your mentality, from relative mundaneness to a certain hypersensitivity," Forleo says, noting that surgical techs need to be on their A-game when it's time for the procedure to take place. "Someone could die if you make a mistake."

Once surgery begins, a surgical technologist's primary duties include passing instruments to the doctor while performing other tasks to assist the surgeon—things like retracting the incision site open so the doctors can better see what they're doing.

If you're thinking those surgical instruments just consist of scalpels and scissors, you're in for a surprise. For their role in the OR, surgical techs need to know the names of *hundreds* of medical instruments. This memorization is one of the more important topics covered in a [Surgical Technologist degree program](#).

As the doctor finishes the surgery, surgical technologists will conduct a count of the sponges, needles and other materials used after each layer of closure. "This is such a vital part of the surgery, to make sure that nothing is **left in the patient**," Fillingane says.

On paper, these duties may seem pretty straightforward. But Fillingane ensures that, in reality, the order and layout of the operating room constantly fluctuates. "You may have two of the same types of surgery, but they'll never be the same," he says. "A huge surprise for me was to expect the unexpected. There is only a basic script to the job, and it changes as situations unfold."

Fillingane goes on to explain that the adjustments and surprises keep the job interesting. Through each procedure, a great surgical tech will be thinking one step ahead, rather than just waiting to be told what to do. *What will the surgeon ask for next? How is this procedure going? Might there be any complications?* These critical thinking and anticipation abilities are important.

## Duties post-surgery

After surgery, the surgical tech applies bandages to the patient and assists in removing him or her from the operating room. They're also a part of the team that cleans the OR after the surgery, alongside housekeeping staff and nurses. This is an important step to help lower the risk of infections.

"After the patient has left the recovery room, I take the dirty instruments to the dirty area of sterile processing so the sterile processing department (SPD) tech can then clean the instruments properly," Fillingane says.

After that important step is completed, the surgical tech prepares for the next case. "If there is a gap in surgeries, I take a break," he adds. "If time allows, I give breaks to other techs. If our sterile processing tech is out sick or on vacation, I fill in and make sure that all the instruments are washed and processed properly."

It's true that the specific surgical technology duties will vary for each healthcare facility. But maintaining a basic understanding of some of the general responsibilities can be a helpful step in determining whether this career path would be a good fit for you.

The next step is learning what skills are needed to carry out these duties.

## What skills are needed to be a surgical technologist?

A successful surgical technologist will have a healthy blend of important technical skills and transferrable soft skills. We used real-time job analysis software to analyze more than 38,000 surgical technologist job postings from the past year. This data helped us identify the hard and soft skills in highest demand for surgical tech candidates:

### Top technical skills:\*

- Surgical procedures
- Surgical technology
- Patient care
- Aseptic technique
- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)

### Top transferrable skills:\*

- Active listening
- Organization
- Critical thinking
- Time management
- Teamwork/collaboration

## Why work as a surgical technologist?

Unless you have already trained to become a surgical technologist, it's unlikely you've already mastered the technical skills listed above. That's just a sampling of the specialized skills and knowledge you'll acquire in a [\*\*Surgical Technologist degree program\*\*](#). But once you've added these abilities to your arsenal, you'll have the rewarding opportunity to impact people's lives on a daily basis.

"You will come across amazing success stories about how a patient recovered due to a procedure you helped make possible," says Anthony Mareno, surgical technologist at [\*\*NJ Sharing Network\*\*](#), an organization devoted to organ and tissue donation. "You will feel as though you were a part of the team that changed that patient's life forever, and that is because you were!"

While surgical techs don't actually perform surgery on patients, it's clear they are integral members of the surgical teams that make meaningful differences in patients' lives. Mareno believes it's empowering to know that someone else is relying on you, whether it be a surgeon hoping you are anticipating his or her next steps, or a circulating nurse waiting on you to give a correct count. "You have a great responsibility," he emphasizes.

## Follow your calling into the operating room

If you're intrigued by these surgical technologist duties, you may be destined to assist in the OR like Mareno says he was. "Once you get into that operating room, you will know that is where you are supposed to be," he explains. "Being a surgical technologist will always keep you interested and wanting more."

Learn why there is no better time than now to answer the call by visiting our article "[\*\*6 Reasons for Becoming a Surgical Tech in 2019 and Beyond\*\*](#)."

*\*Burning-Glass.com (Analysis of 38,713 surgical technologist job postings, Mar. 01, 2018 – Feb. 28, 2019)*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was originally published in January 2013. It has since been updated to include information relevant to 2019. Insight from Fillingane, Forteo and Mareno remains from the original article.*



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