The Role of Health Physicists

Amrutha M*

Department of Chemical Engineering, Andhra University, Andhra Pradesh, India

*Corresponding author: Amrutha M, Department of Chemical Engineering, Andhra University, Andhra Pradesh, India, E-mail: amrutha_m@gmail.com

The responsibilities of a medical health physicist are broad and ever challenging. These individuals work wherever radiation sources are used to diagnose and treat human diseases. Hospitals, clinics, and major medical centres use radiation sources, including x-ray machines, particle accelerators, lasers, and many types of radioactive materials. Medical health physicists are needed to ensure proper and safe working conditions for both patients and medical staff.

Medical health physicists find a variety of professional challenges as more applications in medicine develop each year. Radiology, nuclear medicine, and radiation therapy departments are found in almost every modern hospital today. Each of these departments utilizes radiation sources, and medical health physicists are employed to assure their safe use.

A medical health physicist often serves as the designated Radiation Safety Officer (RSO) for a medical facility. The RSO is responsible for performing radiation safety surveys of all radiation sources used within the facility; monitoring radiation exposure of workers, patients, and visitors to the facility; establishing and monitoring radiation safety procedures; and assuring the medical facility is in compliance with state and federal radiation safety regulations. The medical health physicist may evaluate and make recommendations regarding the potential hazards of nonionizing radiation such as microwaves and laser beams.

Because health physicists have responsible technical positions in several disciplines, you will need a broad background of education and experience. A basic education in the physical sciences is necessary, but training is also required in other areas.

Health physicists check radiation levels at a nuclear weapons test site. If you desire national recognition as a health physics professional, you may seek certification at either of two educational and experience levels. Certification may be obtained from the American Board of Health Physics (ABHP) and, for technicians, through the national registry of radiation protection technologists.

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