The Evolving Role of Laboratory Technologists in Blood Component Therapy: Current Practices and Innovations in Blood Banking

Abeer N. Alanazi[1], Raffah M. Bajudah[2], Khadeejah A. Albaradie[3], Saad M. Alghamdi[4]

Health Affairs at the Ministry of National Guard

Abstract

This study explores the role of laboratory technologists in managing blood component therapy, focusing on cross-matching accuracy, transfusion safety, and the impact of recent innovations such as automation and pathogen inactivation technologies. Quantitative results from a tertiary hospital showed significant improvements in cross-matching accuracy (5.5%) and reduced turnaround times (44%), while the incidence of transfusion-related adverse events decreased by 60-65%. Qualitative data revealed that technologists have successfully adapted to these innovations, although concerns about over-reliance on automation and ethical considerations regarding AI persist. The findings underscore the evolving role of laboratory professionals in ensuring the safety and efficiency of blood component therapy.

Keywords: Blood component therapy, laboratory technologists, cross-matching, automation, pathogen inactivation, transfusion safety, AI in healthcare

Introduction

Blood component therapy is an essential aspect of modern medicine, providing life-saving treatments for patients undergoing surgeries, trauma care, and managing chronic conditions such as anemia and cancer. The process involves the transfusion of specific components of blood, including red blood cells, platelets, plasma, and cryoprecipitate, each tailored to address the patient's particular needs (Hillyer et al., 2013). Ensuring the safety and efficacy of these transfusions relies heavily on the expertise of laboratory technologists, who are responsible for critical tasks such as blood typing, cross-matching, component preparation, and monitoring for transfusion reactions (Mintz, 2011).

One of the key responsibilities of laboratory technologists in blood component therapy is cross-matching, a process that ensures compatibility between donor blood and recipient patients. Cross-matching is vital for preventing hemolytic reactions, which can be life-threatening if incompatible blood is transfused (Hess, 2012). In recent years, advancements in blood banking technology, including automation and pathogen inactivation techniques, have enhanced the ability of laboratory professionals to manage these processes with greater precision and efficiency (Delaney et al., 2016).

As blood component therapy evolves, so too does the role of laboratory technologists. New innovations in the field, such as automated cross-matching systems, advanced blood storage solutions, and artificial intelligence (AI) applications in blood supply management, are transforming how blood is processed, stored, and administered. These technologies not only improve the accuracy of transfusion services but also reduce

the time and labor required to manage blood components, ultimately benefiting both patients and healthcare providers (Klein &Anstee, 2013).

This paper aims to review the current practices and innovations in blood component therapy, with a focus on how laboratory technologists contribute to the management of blood components. By examining the latest advancements in cross-matching, blood safety, and storage technologies, this review will highlight the evolving role of laboratory professionals in ensuring the safe and efficient administration of blood products.

Literature Review

Overview of Blood Component Therapy

Blood component therapy is a cornerstone of modern transfusion medicine, allowing healthcare providers to administer specific components—such as red blood cells, platelets, plasma, and cryoprecipitate—based on individual patient needs (Hillyer et al., 2013). This targeted approach reduces the risks associated with whole blood transfusions and enhances the efficacy of treatment for various clinical conditions, including trauma, surgery, cancer therapy, and chronic anemia (Klein &Anstee, 2013). Laboratory technologists play a vital role in ensuring the compatibility and safety of these blood products, managing the processes of blood typing, cross-matching, and monitoring transfusion reactions (Mintz, 2011).

Cross-Matching Techniques

Cross-matching is one of the most critical steps in blood component therapy, as it ensures compatibility between donor and recipient blood. The traditional cross-matching procedure involves serological testing to confirm that the recipient's antibodies do not react against the donor's red blood cells. This process helps to prevent hemolytic reactions, which can cause serious, life-threatening complications (Hess, 2012). Laboratory technologists are responsible for performing these tests, often under time-sensitive conditions, particularly in emergency situations where transfusions must be conducted quickly and safely (Hillyer et al., 2013).

Recent advancements in automation have significantly improved the efficiency and accuracy of cross-matching. Automated platforms now allow laboratory technologists to perform multiple cross-matches simultaneously, reducing the time required for manual testing and minimizing human error (Dzik, 2009). For instance, automated cross-matching systems, such as those based on gel technology or solid-phase methods, have shown higher reliability and consistency in detecting incompatibilities compared to manual methods (Flegel et al., 2014). These innovations are particularly beneficial in high-volume transfusion services, such as those found in tertiary hospitals, where demand for blood components is constant.

Blood Component Storage and Handling

The proper storage and handling of blood components are essential to maintaining their viability and safety. Each component has specific storage requirements: red blood cells are typically stored at 1-6°C, while platelets must be kept at room temperature and continuously agitated to prevent clumping (Carson et al., 2016). Plasma and cryoprecipitate are frozen to preserve their clotting factors, with thawing required prior to transfusion (Mintz, 2011). Laboratory technologists are tasked with ensuring that these components are stored according to strict guidelines, closely monitoring expiration dates and temperature conditions to prevent degradation of the blood products.

Innovations in storage solutions have enhanced the shelf life and safety of blood components. For example, additive solutions for red blood cells have been developed to extend storage time while maintaining cell

integrity (Hess, 2012). Platelet storage is an ongoing area of research, with recent advances focusing on extending their shelf life beyond the current 5-day limit through new preservation techniques (Stolla et al., 2020). These advancements help to mitigate the challenges of blood shortages by allowing for longer storage periods and reducing the need for frequent donations.

Pathogen Inactivation and Blood Safety

One of the primary concerns in blood component therapy is the risk of transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs), including viruses, bacteria, and parasites. Laboratory technologists play a key role in ensuring that blood products are screened for infectious agents before they are released for transfusion. Traditional methods of pathogen detection, such as nucleic acid testing (NAT) and serological assays, have been effective in reducing the transmission of diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C (Carson et al., 2016).

In recent years, pathogen inactivation technologies (PIT) have emerged as a groundbreaking innovation in blood safety. These technologies, which use methods such as photochemical treatment and ultraviolet light, inactivate a wide range of pathogens in blood components without compromising their function (Schlenke, 2014). Studies have shown that pathogen inactivation reduces the risk of TTIs and improves the overall safety profile of blood products (Prowse, 2008). The adoption of PIT in blood banks has enhanced the role of laboratory technologists in ensuring the safety of transfusion services, particularly in regions with higher rates of infectious diseases.

Automation and Technology in Blood Banking

The integration of automation in blood component therapy has transformed the role of laboratory technologists. Automated systems are increasingly being used for blood typing, cross-matching, and infectious disease screening, significantly reducing the time and labor required for these tasks. For example, robotic systems in blood banks can process samples, perform serological tests, and store and retrieve blood products with minimal human intervention (Dzik, 2009). These systems improve the efficiency and accuracy of blood banking operations, allowing laboratory technologists to focus on more complex decision-making tasks.

Moreover, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) are being explored as tools for optimizing blood supply management and predicting transfusion needs. AI-driven algorithms can analyze historical data to forecast demand for specific blood components, helping blood banks to manage their inventory more effectively and reduce wastage (Muthu Kumaran et al., 2022). The use of AI in blood banking represents a promising avenue for further innovation, potentially enhancing the ability of laboratory technologists to manage blood components more proactively and efficiently.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite these innovations, laboratory technologists continue to face challenges in managing blood component therapy. Blood shortages, particularly of rare blood types, remain a persistent issue in many regions (Knezevic et al., 2022). Additionally, the increasing complexity of blood component therapy, with the introduction of new technologies and protocols, requires continuous professional development and training for laboratory staff. Ensuring that technologists are equipped with the latest knowledge and skills is essential for maintaining the safety and efficacy of transfusion services.

Looking ahead, ongoing research into synthetic blood substitutes, gene-edited blood products, and enhanced preservation techniques may further transform the landscape of blood component therapy (Dzik, 2009). These advancements could reduce the reliance on human donors and improve the availability of blood components in times of crisis. The evolving role of laboratory technologists will be critical in adapting to these innovations and ensuring that they are safely and effectively integrated into clinical practice.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was conducted as a mixed-methods review at a tertiary hospital, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the role of laboratory technologists in managing blood component therapy. The primary objective was to investigate current practices in cross-matching, blood component handling, and transfusion safety, while also exploring recent innovations in blood banking technology and their impact on laboratory operations.

The study was divided into two main phases:

1. Quantitative Phase: Data collection focused on key performance indicators (KPIs) related to blood component management, including cross-matching accuracy, turnaround times, and transfusion safety outcomes.
2. Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with laboratory technologists and clinical staff to gather insights into their experiences with blood component therapy and the adoption of new technologies.

Study Setting and Participants

The study took place in the blood bank and transfusion services department of a tertiary hospital that serves both inpatient and outpatient populations. The laboratory handles approximately 1,500 blood component requests per month, supporting various departments including surgery, oncology, and critical care.

A total of 40 laboratory professionals participated in the study, including:

- 30 Laboratory Technologists: These individuals were responsible for performing blood typing, cross-matching, and managing blood component storage and transfusion safety protocols.
- 10 Clinical Pathologists and Physicians: These clinicians provided input on the clinical use of blood components and collaborated with the laboratory in managing transfusions and adverse reactions.

Data Collection

1. Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative phase involved analyzing retrospective data from the hospital's Laboratory Information System (LIS) over a 12-month period. The following key performance indicators (KPIs) were extracted and analyzed:

- Cross-Matching Accuracy: The percentage of successful cross-matches without transfusion reactions, compared to cases where further testing or interventions were required due to incompatibilities.
- Turnaround Time (TAT): The time taken from receipt of a blood request to the delivery of cross-matched blood components, measured pre- and post-implementation of automated cross-matching systems.
- Transfusion Safety Outcomes: The incidence of transfusion-related adverse events (e.g., hemolytic reactions, febrile reactions, transfusion-related acute lung injury) before and after the adoption of pathogen inactivation technologies.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and paired t-tests were applied to compare the pre- and post-innovation performance metrics. The study also used chi-square tests to evaluate the association between the introduction of new technologies and the reduction in transfusion-related complications.

2. Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative phase of the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with laboratory technologists, clinical pathologists, and physicians who regularly interacted with the blood bank. The interview topics included:

- Experiences with Cross-Matching Procedures: Participants shared insights into the challenges and successes of manual versus automated cross-matching methods.
- Adoption of Blood Banking Innovations: Participants discussed the perceived impact of new technologies, such as pathogen inactivation and AI-based blood management systems, on laboratory workflows and patient outcomes.
- Transfusion Safety and Protocols: Laboratory staff provided feedback on current safety protocols, including how innovations have influenced transfusion safety and reduced risks.

Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software for thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying key themes, sub-themes, and patterns in the experiences of laboratory professionals, with a particular emphasis on the integration of technology and its effect on their roles.

Data Analysis

1. Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the key performance indicators, including mean cross-matching accuracy, average turnaround times, and the incidence of transfusion reactions.
- Paired t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-innovation metrics, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$.
- Chi-square tests were used to determine whether the implementation of pathogen inactivation technology was associated with a reduction in transfusion-related complications.
- Results were presented in tabular format, showing differences in performance before and after the adoption of automated systems and innovations in blood safety.

2. Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed on the transcribed interviews using an inductive coding approach. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to:

- Technologist Experiences with Automation: Benefits and challenges of transitioning from manual to automated cross-matching systems.
- Impact of Innovations on Workflow: Perceived changes in efficiency, accuracy, and workload due to the introduction of new technologies.
- Perceived Improvements in Transfusion Safety: Insights into how pathogen inactivation and other safety measures have affected patient outcomes.

Key themes were categorized, and participant responses were used to support the interpretation of these themes in the context of current practices and innovations in blood banking.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee prior to the start of data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with assurances of confidentiality and the anonymization of all responses. Quantitative data from the LIS were de-identified to ensure patient privacy, and no personally identifiable information was used in the study.

Limitations

The study was conducted in a single tertiary hospital, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Additionally, the reliance on retrospective data may introduce potential biases, such as incomplete or missing data from the hospital's laboratory system. Future studies should include a larger sample size across multiple institutions to validate the findings and further explore the impact of innovations in blood component therapy.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data analysis focused on three key performance indicators: cross-matching accuracy, turnaround time, and transfusion safety outcomes. The data were collected over a 12-month period before and after the implementation of innovations such as automated cross-matching systems and pathogen inactivation technologies.

1. Cross-Matching Accuracy

The implementation of automated cross-matching systems significantly improved the accuracy of blood matching, reducing the need for additional testing and preventing potential transfusion reactions.

Metric	Pre-Innovation (%)	Post-Innovation (%)	Percentage Improvement (%)
Successful Cross-Matches	93.5	98.6	5.5
Incompatible Cross-Matches	6.5	1.4	78.5

Table 1: Cross-Matching Accuracy Before and After Automation

2. Turnaround Time (TAT)

Turnaround times for cross-matching and blood component delivery significantly decreased following the implementation of automated systems, particularly in urgent care situations.

Test Type	Pre-Innovation TAT (hours)	Post-Innovation TAT (hours)	Percentage Reduction (%)
Routine Cross-Matching	3.8	2.1	44.7
Urgent Cross-Matching (e.g., OR)	1.6	0.9	43.8

Table 2: Comparison of Turnaround Times Before and After Automation

3. Transfusion Safety Outcomes

The introduction of pathogen inactivation technologies significantly reduced the incidence of transfusion-related adverse events, particularly in cases of transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs).

Adverse Event Type	Pre-Innovation Incidence (per 1,000 transfusions)	Post-Innovation Incidence (per 1,000 transfusions)	Percentage Reduction (%)
Transfusion-Transmitted Infections (TTIs)	2.3	0.8	65.2
Hemolytic Reactions	1.5	0.6	60.0
Febrile Reactions	3.1	1.2	61.3

Table 3: Transfusion-Related Adverse Events Before and After Pathogen Inactivation Implementation

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with laboratory technologists, clinical pathologists, and physicians. The findings are grouped into three primary themes, each with several sub-themes.

Theme 1: Improved Workflow Efficiency

Sub-Theme	Participant Responses
Automation of Cross-Matching	"With the automated systems in place, we're able to perform multiple cross-matches at once, which has really improved our overall efficiency." (Technologist 7)
Reduced Workload for Technologists	"Before automation, we had to manually perform each test, and it was time-consuming. Now, with automation, we can focus more on quality control and patient safety." (Technologist 15)

Participants consistently highlighted the benefits of automation in cross-matching and blood component handling. The automated systems allowed for quicker processing, particularly in emergency situations, and reduced the manual workload for technologists, enabling them to focus on other critical tasks.

Theme 2: Enhanced Transfusion Safety

Sub-Theme	Participant Responses
Reduction in Transfusion Reactions	"Since we started using pathogen inactivation, the number of febrile and hemolytic reactions has decreased significantly." (Technologist 12)
Safer Blood Components	"We've noticed a lot fewer

	complications during transfusions since we introduced the new safety protocols, especially with the inactivation technology." (Pathologist 4)

Laboratory technologists and pathologists noted the direct impact of pathogen inactivation technologies on transfusion safety. The reduction in adverse events, especially transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs), was attributed to the enhanced safety protocols that had been adopted with the new technology.

Theme 3: Technologist Adaptation to New Technologies

Sub-Theme	Participant Responses
Training and Learning Curve	"There was definitely a learning curve when we first introduced the automated cross-matching system, but with ongoing training, it's become much easier to manage." (Technologist 9)
Impact on Technologist Roles	"With the automated systems taking over some of the more routine tasks, our roles have shifted to overseeing the process and making sure everything is running smoothly." (Technologist 3)

Participants discussed how the introduction of new technologies required additional training but ultimately resulted in more efficient workflows and a shift in their responsibilities. Laboratory technologists were now more focused on overseeing automated processes and ensuring quality control, rather than performing manual tasks.

Theme 4: Ethical Considerations and Trust in Technology

Sub-Theme	Participant Responses
Trust in Automation	"At first, I was a bit skeptical about relying too much on the automated systems, but they've proven to be reliable and have improved our outcomes." (Technologist 10)
Ethical Concerns with AI	"There's always the concern about whether we're losing the human element in decision-making, especially with AI predicting outcomes in blood supply management." (Pathologist 5)

Although participants expressed initial skepticism about fully trusting automated and AI-driven systems, the improved accuracy and outcomes gradually built trust in these technologies. However, some participants raised ethical concerns about the increasing reliance on AI and the potential loss of human oversight in critical decision-making processes.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the critical role that laboratory technologists play in managing blood component therapy, particularly in light of recent innovations such as automation and pathogen inactivation technologies. These innovations have not only improved the efficiency and accuracy of blood component handling but have also reshaped the responsibilities and workflows of laboratory professionals.

Improvements in Cross-Matching Accuracy and Turnaround Time

The quantitative results indicate that the implementation of automated cross-matching systems led to significant improvements in both cross-matching accuracy and turnaround times. The reduction in incompatible cross-matches by 78.5% (Table 1) and the shortened turnaround time by approximately 44% (Table 2) demonstrate the efficacy of automation in reducing human error and increasing the speed of blood component preparation, particularly in urgent scenarios. These findings align with previous studies, which have shown that automation can enhance the reliability and efficiency of laboratory services (Dzik, 2009).

Laboratory technologists highlighted these improvements during the qualitative interviews, noting that automation has allowed them to handle a higher volume of tests while maintaining or improving accuracy. This shift has not only enhanced workflow efficiency but has also reduced the manual burden on technologists, enabling them to focus more on quality control and patient safety. These findings suggest that automation is particularly beneficial in high-demand environments, such as tertiary hospitals, where rapid and accurate blood component preparation is critical.

Enhanced Transfusion Safety

The study also found a significant reduction in transfusion-related adverse events following the introduction of pathogen inactivation technologies. The reduction in transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs) by 65.2% and hemolytic reactions by 60% (Table 3) supports the growing body of literature that emphasizes the safety benefits of pathogen inactivation (Prowse, 2008). This technology, which works by inactivating a wide range of pathogens in blood products, has been shown to enhance the safety of blood transfusions, particularly in settings with high infection risks.

Participants in the qualitative phase confirmed these findings, reporting fewer transfusion complications and expressing confidence in the safety improvements brought about by pathogen inactivation. The combination of pathogen inactivation and automated cross-matching appears to have created a more robust system for managing blood components, ultimately reducing the likelihood of adverse events and improving patient outcomes.

Evolving Roles and Responsibilities of Laboratory Technologists

One of the key themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis was the evolving role of laboratory technologists in response to new technologies. As automated systems have taken over many routine tasks, such as cross-matching and blood typing, technologists now spend more time overseeing the process and ensuring that the systems function correctly. While this shift has improved efficiency, it has also required technologists to adapt to new responsibilities and develop expertise in troubleshooting and quality control.

Participants acknowledged the learning curve associated with these changes, particularly the need for continuous training on new systems (Table 5). However, most technologists expressed a positive view of these developments, noting that they have led to a more streamlined workflow and allowed them to focus on ensuring the accuracy and safety of blood transfusions. These findings align with existing research that

suggests automation is not a replacement for human expertise but rather a tool that enhances the capabilities of laboratory professionals (Flegel et al., 2014).

Ethical Considerations and Trust in Technology

While the study highlights the numerous benefits of automation and pathogen inactivation, it also raises important ethical considerations, particularly regarding trust in AI and automated systems. Some participants expressed concerns about the potential for over-reliance on AI-driven processes, particularly in critical areas such as blood supply management and cross-matching (Table 6). These concerns reflect a broader debate within the healthcare community about the role of AI in decision-making and the potential risks of diminishing human oversight (Rajkomar et al., 2018).

The participants 'mixed responses suggest that while automation and AI have proven to be reliable, there is still a need for a balanced approach in which human oversight remains integral to the process. This is particularly important in cases where AI may produce ambiguous results or where ethical decisions must be made regarding patient care. Moving forward, it will be essential to maintain transparency in AI algorithms and ensure that technologists are adequately trained to understand and manage these systems effectively.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the clear advantages of automation and pathogen inactivation technologies, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. The transition to these new systems requires significant investment in training and infrastructure, which can be a barrier for smaller or resource-limited hospitals. Additionally, ongoing blood shortages, particularly for rare blood types, continue to present challenges in managing blood component therapy, as highlighted in previous studies (Knezevic et al., 2022). Innovations in blood preservation and synthetic blood substitutes may offer solutions to these challenges, but further research is needed to explore their viability and implementation in clinical practice.

Looking ahead, the role of laboratory technologists is likely to continue evolving as new technologies emerge. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in blood supply management and predictive analytics represents a promising area for future innovation, allowing for more efficient use of resources and improved patient outcomes (Muthu Kumaran et al., 2022). However, ensuring that technologists remain at the center of these processes, with the necessary training and support, will be crucial to maintaining the high standards of safety and accuracy in blood component therapy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that innovations in automation and pathogen inactivation have significantly improved the management of blood component therapy, particularly in terms of cross-matching accuracy, turnaround times, and transfusion safety. Laboratory technologists have successfully adapted to these new technologies, although ongoing training and ethical considerations will need to be addressed as AI continues to play a larger role in transfusion medicine. The future of blood component therapy will likely involve a continued partnership between human expertise and advanced technologies, ensuring the safe and effective use of blood products in patient care.

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