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Reducing Pre-Analytical Errors: Strengthening Quality and Patient Safety in Laboratory Services

Aarathy Radhakrishnan
The View Hospital, Qatar

I. INTRODUCTION

Laboratory medicine plays a vital role in modern healthcare, influencing a significant proportion of clinical decisions. While advancements in analytical technologies have improved accuracy and efficiency, the pre-analytical phase continues to remain the most vulnerable stage of laboratory testing. Errors occurring before sample analysis can compromise patient safety, delay diagnosis, increase healthcare costs, and reduce confidence in laboratory services.

Among the various pre-analytical challenges, hemolysis and specimen rejection remain some of the most frequent and preventable causes of laboratory error. Addressing these issues through structured quality improvement initiatives is essential for enhancing laboratory performance and ensuring reliable patient outcomes.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE BURDEN OF PRE-ANALYTICAL ERRORS

The laboratory testing process is broadly divided into three phases: pre-analytical, analytical, and post-analytical. Studies consistently demonstrate that the majority of laboratory errors occur during the pre-analytical phase. These errors commonly arise during patient preparation, specimen collection, labeling, handling, transport, and processing.

Common causes of specimen rejection include:

1) Hemolyzed samples
2) Clotted anticoagulated specimens
3) Incorrect sample containers
4) Mislabelled or unlabelled specimens
5) Insufficient sample volume
6) Delayed transport or processing
7) Contaminated specimens

Among these, hemolysis remains the most frequently encountered issue in many healthcare organizations. Hemolysis occurs when red blood cells rupture, releasing intracellular components such as potassium, lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), and hemoglobin into the plasma or serum. This can significantly alter laboratory values, leading to inaccurate results, unnecessary repeat collections, delayed clinical decisions, and increased patient discomfort.

III. WHY HEMOLYSIS MATTERS

Hemolyzed specimens not only affect test reliability but also create operational challenges within the laboratory. Critical investigations such as potassium, coagulation studies, liver enzymes, magnesium, and troponin levels may become unreliable in hemolyzed samples.

The consequences extend beyond the laboratory:

1) Delayed treatment decisions
2) Increased turnaround time
3) Additional workload for healthcare staff
4) Repeat venipuncture and patient dissatisfaction
5) Increased operational costs

Therefore, reducing hemolysis is not merely a laboratory concern but an important patient safety and quality improvement priority.

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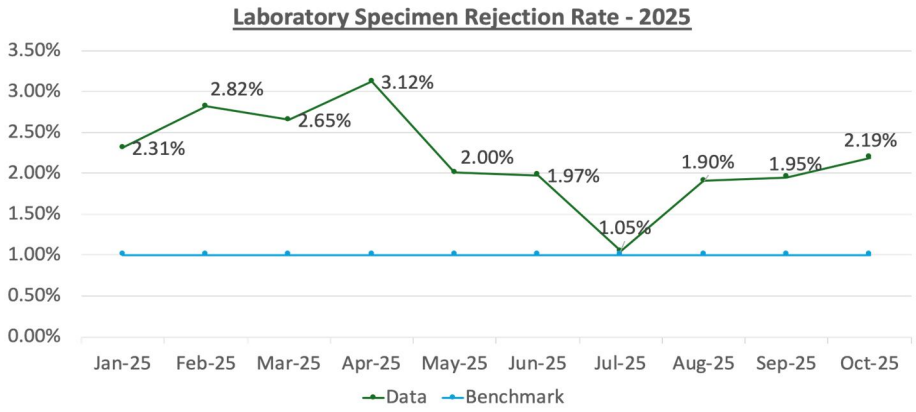
IV. ROOT CAUSES BEHIND HEMOLYSIS

Several preventable factors contribute to hemolysis during specimen collection and handling. Poor venipuncture practices, use of inappropriate needle sizes, prolonged tourniquet application, vigorous shaking of collection tubes, improper transport conditions, and delayed sample processing are among the common causes.

In many healthcare settings, variations in staff competency and inconsistent adherence to standard operating procedures further increase the risk of specimen rejection. Lack of awareness regarding proper collection techniques and insufficient communication between laboratory and clinical teams can also contribute to recurring errors. Identifying these root causes is the first step toward implementing sustainable corrective measures.

V. A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT APPROACH TO REDUCING SPECIMEN REJECTION

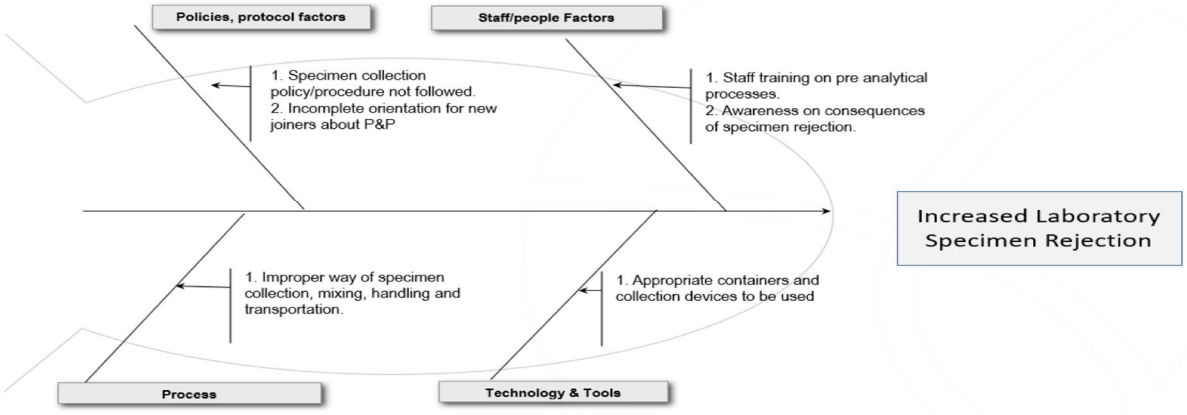
A structured quality improvement project conducted over six months demonstrated how systematic interventions can significantly reduce pre-analytical specimen rejection rates. The project aimed to reduce specimen rejection rates from 3% to below 1% through a multidisciplinary strategy focused on education, process standardization, monitoring, and continuous feedback.



Using the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycle, Fish bone Diagram, and Six Sigma DMAIC methodology, the initiative focused on:

1) Data analysis and identification of rejection trends
2) Root cause analysis
3) Policy orientation and staff education
4) Face-to-face training sessions
5) Quick reference educational materials
6) Sharing KPI reports with clinical units
7) Ensuring adequate supply availability
8) Continuous monitoring and reassessment

The initiative demonstrated measurable improvement in rejection rates, particularly after enhanced communication and targeted interventions were implemented.



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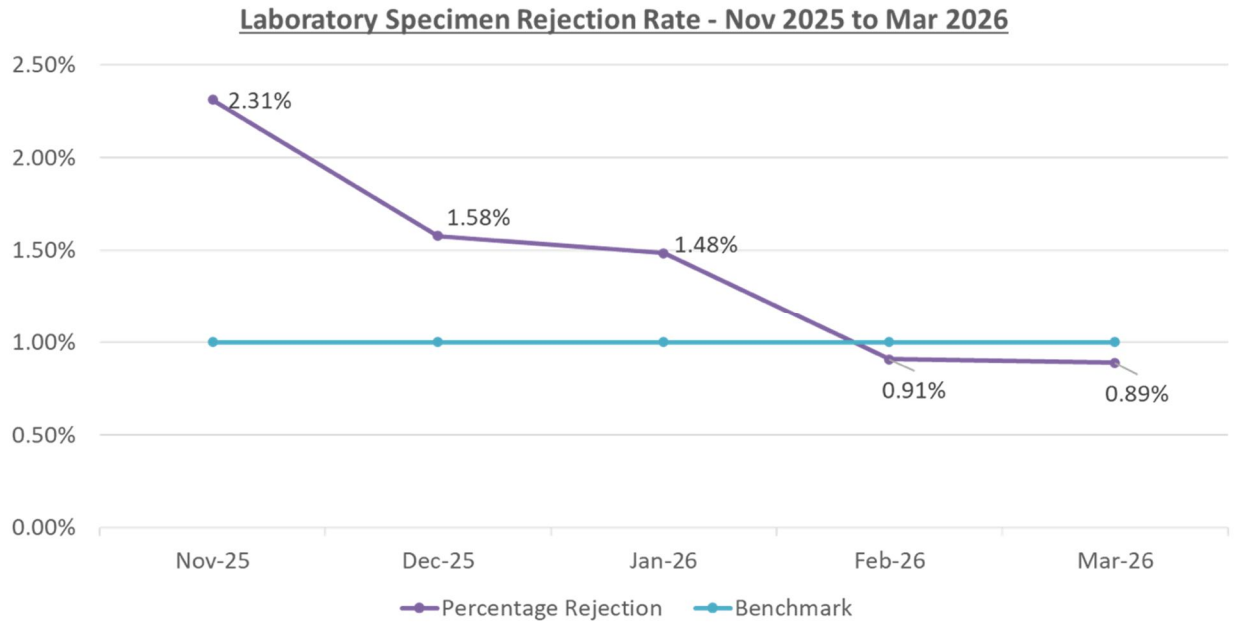
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VI. STRATEGIES THAT DRIVE SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT

One of the key learnings from the project was the importance of continuous staff education and competency assessment. Simple interventions such as quick reference cards and focused awareness campaigns proved highly effective in improving compliance.



Standardization of blood collection procedures also played a critical role. Consistent adherence to evidence-based phlebotomy practices reduced variability and minimized collection-related errors. Additionally, monitoring hemolysis rates as a quality indicator enabled departments to identify high-risk areas and implement focused corrective actions. Sharing performance data with frontline healthcare staff increased accountability and promoted a stronger culture of quality. Effective collaboration between laboratory professionals, nurses, clinicians, and hospital leadership emerged as another essential factor for sustained success.



VII. MOVING TOWARD A CULTURE OF QUALITY

Reducing pre-analytical errors requires more than technical corrections; it requires a cultural shift toward patient-centered quality care. Healthcare organizations must invest in continuous education, robust quality monitoring systems, process standardization, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

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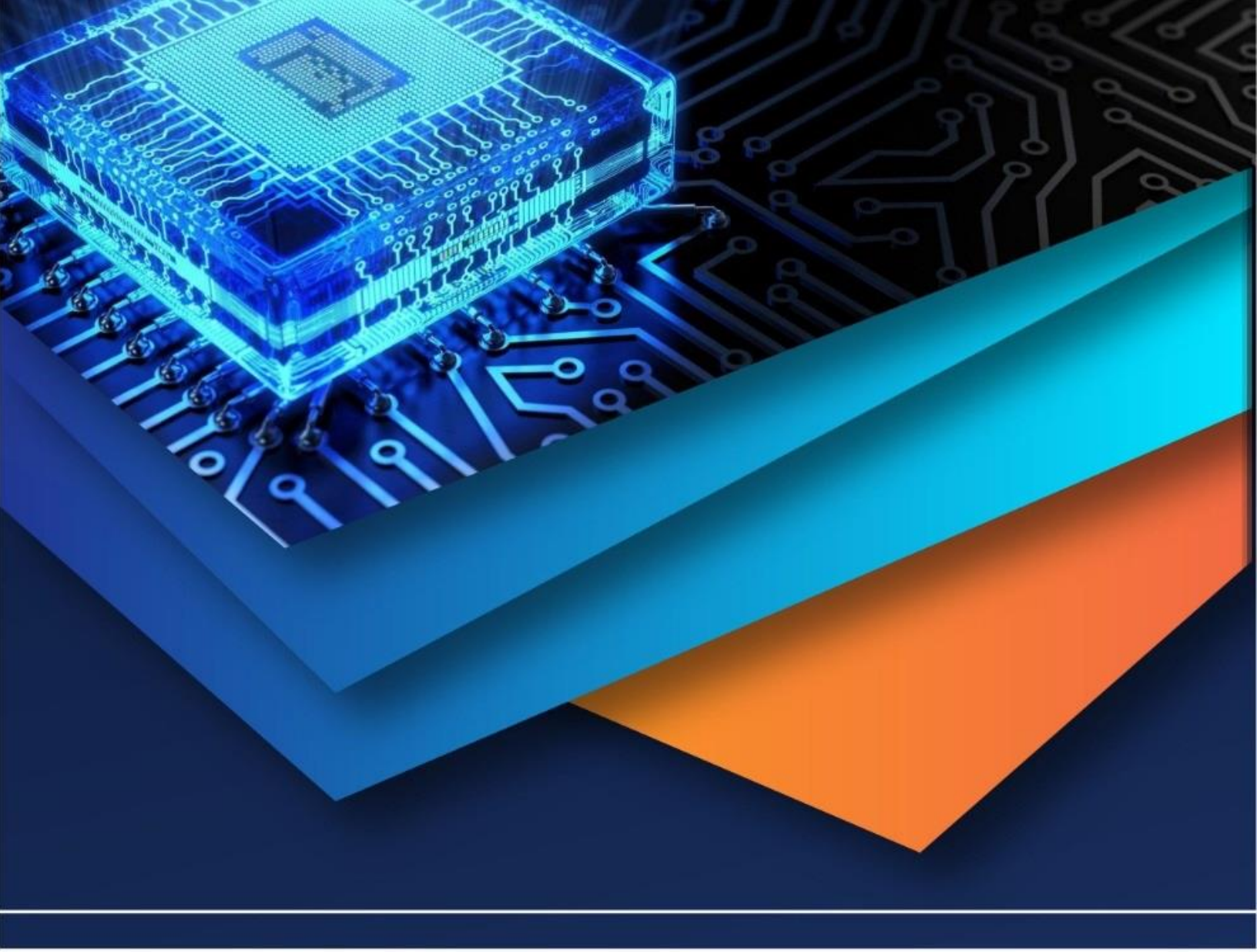
Technology and automation can further support improvement efforts through barcode systems, automated transport systems, and analyzer-based hemolysis monitoring. However, the foundation of quality laboratory practice remains skilled healthcare professionals who understand the importance of specimen integrity.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Pre-analytical errors continue to represent a major challenge in laboratory medicine, with hemolysis being one of the most common yet preventable causes of specimen rejection. Through structured quality improvement initiatives, healthcare organizations can significantly reduce laboratory errors, improve patient safety, and enhance operational efficiency.

Sustainable improvement depends on standardized procedures, continuous staff competency development, proactive monitoring, and strong teamwork across departments. As laboratories continue to evolve, maintaining focus on pre-analytical quality will remain essential for achieving excellence in patient care. Ultimately, every accurate laboratory result begins with a high-quality specimen making pre-analytical excellence the true foundation of reliable healthcare delivery.

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