

Laboratory Surveyor Spotlight

Q&A with Dr. John Russell Forney



Dr. John Russell Forney, who prefers to be called Russ, discovered his love of microbiology at an early age. While working a summer job in a laboratory at age 16, he determined that science would be his life's work – a decision that has shaped his life. His distinguished career, which included 28 years on active duty with the U.S. Army, has presented opportunities for study and research, travel, teaching, getting to know people all over the world, and writing.

His current position as a Joint Commission surveyor for the Laboratory Accreditation Program enables him to continue enjoying all those opportunities. We caught up with Dr. Forney to learn more about him and his career, his work with The Joint Commission, and why he still gets excited about every survey he conducts.

Q: You have had a varied and interesting career, having served with the U.S. Army for 28 years and working as a state surveyor for nine years after that. What brought you to The Joint Commission and what has been your experience since joining the team?

A: I realized at a young age that teaching is something that comes naturally to me. I was able to teach at West Point for five years as my last tour of duty with the Army. I enjoyed the work I did as a state surveyor, but it focused on the compliance piece and didn't allow for teaching. I had been director of several laboratories when I was in the Army and I'd met some Joint Commission surveyors. I admired their approach and liked that, in addition to determining compliance, their jobs included teaching and sharing. That drew me to The Joint Commission, and it's been a good fit. It's rewarding to help a health care organization understand and quantify its problems, and then work with them to find solutions.

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Q: Could you describe an opportunity when you’ve been able to put your teaching skills to work since joining The Joint Commission?

A: One experience I particularly remember is when I went to survey a small hospital laboratory. It was a young staff, and they had a lot of turnover. They were doing a good job, but they were struggling to understand some basic concepts with statistics and quality control. I came in for three days to survey, and they asked if I could come back in the evenings to teach a one-hour class on the role of statistics in assessing quality control. I jumped at the chance to do it. The first night I went to the local grocery store and bought two one-pound bags of peanut M&Ms. I used the different colors and random selection process to teach about sample bias, probability, correlation, and other topics, and each time we met I could see the staff had greater understanding and was able to look at their quality control experience with a whole new level of excitement. That was a lot of fun and something I’ll always remember.



Q: How is The Joint Commission survey process different from other accreditation agencies? How does The Joint Commission’s approach to a laboratory survey differ from that of a state inspection?

A: Having worked as a state surveyor and for The Joint Commission, I can tell you that The Joint Commission has a much different approach. A federally trained state surveyor will inspect the laboratory and everything within its physical environment – within the four walls. But a Joint Commission surveyor has a process or systems focus that goes much further than the laboratory. Think about a blood transfusion. The Joint Commission survey begins when a unit of blood arrives from a donation site. We will follow that blood, literally, from the time it arrives to the time it is transfused to a patient. A state surveyor probably wouldn’t follow that blood out of the laboratory because once it leaves it’s subject to a different set of regulations. The Joint Commission’s process is seamless. We follow the entire life cycle of that blood.



Q: About how many surveys do you normally complete in a year, and how do the laboratories you survey vary from one another?

A: The number of surveys I was able to complete in 2020 was lower than normal due to travel restrictions, but in a normal year I do between 30-40 surveys. Each survey is exciting because it’s an opportunity to interact and find creative ways to work with people in varied settings. I have a fond memory of completing an extensive five-day survey at a large teaching hospital in California, then traveling to New Mexico to survey a tiny Native American health service facility. The large hospital was super-sophisticated and impressive, but what struck me about that small health center and its employees was their commitment and the pride they had for the work they were doing. I employ basically the same survey process with every laboratory I visit, but my approach can vary tremendously depending on the type of laboratory and the people I get to interact with.

“I think what really sets The Joint Commission apart from other agencies is the healthy sense of collegiality that exists among all the surveyors ... I may do 95 percent of my surveys solo, but I never feel like I’m alone. There’s always someone I can reach out to, and that’s empowering.”



Q: Can you tell us what you find to be unique about The Joint Commission and its surveyors?

A: I think what really sets The Joint Commission apart from other agencies is the healthy sense of collegiality that exists among all the surveyors. No one assumes the role of “I know everything,” and everyone endorses the concept that each one of us has value. There’s this informal network within the organization that includes a running dialogue of sharing experiences, asking and answering questions, and generally just supporting each another. It’s not unusual for a colleague to text or email late at night, looking for help with a problem, and it’s a good feeling to know there is always someone there.



Q: How do organizations benefit from working with The Joint Commission?

A: Hospitals and laboratories are required by the federal government to be surveyed for accreditation. They can have a state or federal surveyor do that, or another organization, like The Joint Commission. Our surveys are comprehensive, and organizations benefit from the learning component that’s part of our process. And, when a hospital or laboratory is accredited by The Joint Commission, they are very proud to display that seal because it’s known as a high standard of achievement. I think it’s a combination of those things that is attractive to customers.



Q: What advice or assurance would you offer to organization associates and leaders who are looking forward to their Joint Commission laboratory survey?

A: I would tell them that I’m excited to see them and look forward to being able to listen to their concerns and help them identify solutions to any problems. It doesn’t matter if the organization is big or small, urban or rural, we will meet you at the level where you are and lead you in engaging in creative thought processes for coming up with the answers you need in order to operate at your very best.



Q: You’ve said you love to travel, and that you and your wife do as much traveling as you can. Between work and traveling, do you have time for any community engagement?

A: Since I retired from the Army 15 years ago, I’ve been working with veteran’s groups, specifically with vets who have suffered injuries. I have a Bronze Star myself, and fully realize the challenges of service. I sit and talk with these young vets who have been through so much. I see what they’ve managed to overcome and accomplish, and it’s just incredibly inspiring. I know I’m the volunteer, but I’m sure I get more out of those visits than they do.”



Q: Can you tell me something about yourself that has helped to shape your perspective and makes you uniquely qualified for your work at The Joint Commission?

A: I am blessed with an inexhaustible curiosity that causes me to constantly seek out new experiences. That makes every survey I do exciting, because each one is different and each one presents an opportunity to engage and interact with people. To be able to listen to customers, then work together with them to find solutions and facilitate processes is amazing work. It makes what I do fun and interesting and rewarding every time.

**John Russell (Russ) Forney, PhD, MT(ASCP)**

Laboratory Surveyor
THE JOINT COMMISSION

John Russell (Russ) Forney is currently a Joint Commission surveyor for the Laboratory Accreditation Program. In this role, he surveys the standards in the Comprehensive Accreditation Manual/Accreditation Manual for Pathology and Clinical Laboratory Services.

Prior to joining The Joint Commission, Dr. Forney served 9 years as a CMS-trained surveyor with the Wyoming Department of Health. In addition to laboratories, he surveyed acute care and critical access hospitals, ambulatory surgery centers, and long-term care facilities. Previously, he spent 28 years in the U.S. Army holding a variety of assignments in field operations, clinical laboratories, primary and applied research, and academic positions at the U.S. Military Academy and Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

Dr. Forney received his PhD at Utah State University (clinical microbiology) and completed his post-doctoral research experience in clinical parasitology and tropical medicine at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. He earned a M.S. in Medical Technology from West Virginia University and completed his undergraduate degree at Florida State University.

When they are able to, Dr. Forney and his wife, Cinderella, travel extensively. He enjoys long trips on his motorcycle, normally covering 2,500 in a week. Having moved 26 times and lived in 18 different states, Dr. Forney finds it difficult to keep his wanderlust in check. The father of two grown sons, one of whom is a member of the Army and the other a high school English teacher, Dr. Forney also enjoys telling stories, and he is a regular freelance contributor to several outdoor magazines. An avid fly fisherman and known internationally for his ability to tie fishing flies, he is never at a loss for something to do.

Learn more about the value of Joint Commission laboratory accreditation for your organization. Visit us at www.jointcommission.org/lab or write to us at qualitylabs@jointcommission.org.
