Microbiology’s Go-to Guy:
Philip Gialanella, MS, Manager, Montefiore’s Clinical Microbiology Lab

What does it take to keep one of the New York metro area’s busiest hospital-based microbiology laboratories running smoothly? Ask Philip Gialanella, MS, manager of Montefiore’s Clinical Microbiology Laboratory. Mr. Gialanella is the human engine that keeps the Microbiology Lab humming to ensure that patients receive the best possible care.

Each week, the lab receives an average of 200-250 blood cultures and 300-400 urine cultures and between October and April, respiratory infection season, about 300 throat cultures daily.

A kind, soft-spoken man with a serious demeanor, Mr. Gialanella is in charge of day-to-day operations. In addition to supervising a staff of 32 technologists, four technical supervisors and two administrative associates, he’s responsible for hiring staff, scheduling, overseeing supply orders, and making sure all specimens are processed appropriately and on a timely basis.

Paramount among his many responsibilities: answering technical questions from staff. His ability to provide reliably accurate answers is crucial to “the relationship between what we report out and how the physician interprets the test results.”

“I tell my staff all the time that we’re here for one reason only: to help patients,” says the 37-year Montefiore veteran.

His single-minded commitment to that credo makes Mr. Gialanella an exceptional colleague and an invaluable resource, says Michael H. Levi, ScD, director of the Microbiology Lab. “Phil
plays an essential role in our ongoing efforts to enhance the services,” he says. “From shortening the turnaround time for test results to getting a new technology up and running, he makes it happen. And he is a wonderful role model.”

**Collaborator and Problem Solver**

Mr. Gialanella consults multiple times a day with Montefiore’s Antimicrobial Stewardship and Infection Prevention team, led by Belinda Ostrowsky, MD, MPH.

“Phil is a man of few words and absolute integrity,” says Dr. Ostrowsky. “Whatever needs to get done, whenever a problem needs to be solved, he’s on it. If there’s something you want to know about in the lab, he’s your man. And if he brings up a problem, he’s probably right.

“Often, we joke that you usually get a one-word reply email from Phil, like ‘Ok’ or ‘Yes,’” she adds with a smile. “But we’re always confident that he leaps into action to do so many things behind the scenes in the Microbiology Lab to help the patient and our team.”

**Born to Lead**

Mr. Gialanella came to the United States from Italy at age 14. After earning his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in biology with emphasis on microbiology at St. John’s University he worked as an assistant microbiologist at North Central Bronx Hospital. A discerning supervisor saw his potential and encouraged him to pursue the management track.

When a weekend supervisor position opened up at Montefiore, “I decided to take a chance on what I thought would be a one to two-year position,” he recalls. The lab had a new director at the time, John C. McKitrick, PhD, a distinguished microbiologist and an esteemed member of the Montefiore Einstein faculty who died in 2013. “We clicked,” says Mr. Gialanella, noting that Dr. McKitrick “made a lot of good changes” like extending the lab’s hours to 7 days a week. “Dr. McKitrick played a major role in my professional life,” says Mr. Gialanella. “He had a vision: that we always have to think about the patient.”

**Training the Next Generation**

Teaching is close to Mr. Gialanella’s heart. He’s been conducting lab sessions for medical students at Albert Einstein College of Medicine for many years. In 2009, he was inducted into the College of Medicine’s Leo M. Davidoff Society, which honors teachers who have made significant contributions to the education of Einstein students.

He credits his role models with his teaching style. When he was a graduate student at St. John’s University, his professor of microbiology arranged an internship with Edward J. Bottone, PhD, a world-renowned microbiologist and then-director of microbiology at Mt. Sinai. “I observed that he would take time to look at things and to explain—never in a rush—just like a textbook, step by step, what this is, and how does it affect x, y and z.”

Like his mentor Dr. McKitrick, Mr. Gialanella excels at teaching pathology residents and fellows.
“We show them how to solve microbiological problems so they can use that information years from now,” he says. Infectious Disease fellows spend a month in the Microbiology Lab to observe the various procedures. “I try to help them to understand that there are plusses and minuses in everything we do, and why it may take extra time to get a result.”

He has also initiated microbiology internships with York College and New York Methodist Hospital and is currently in discussions with Mercy College. He hopes the best trainees will be inspired to come and work at Montefiore.

Mr. Gialanella with Karishma Mangaldin, microbiology intern, who is preparing for a future career as a medical laboratory technician.

Embracing Technology

Like all medical fields, clinical microbiology has been revolutionized by the rise of modern technology. And Phil Gialanella has evolved right along with it. With the help of his colleagues, he set up the MALDI TOF and PCR machines that have “made a tremendous, positive difference” in the Microbiology Lab.

Still, Dr. Ostrowsky observes, many young residents don’t fully understand what goes into lab tests behind the scenes. Sophisticated algorithms, she says “will never replace the ability of people like Phil to look at a micro-organism and instantly recognize what it is and, more importantly, what needs to be done.”

Words of Wisdom

Mr. Gialanella, who is a recipient of Montefiore’s Excellence in Service Award, has this advice for young people seeking a fulfilling career path:
“Microbiology is a very open, challenging field with many opportunities. Whether you want to be a clinician or if your goal is to do research to develop new drugs, you need to know about microbiology. We’re in a unique position to help physicians make the best possible decisions for patient care.”