

## **What Do Respiratory Therapists Do?**

Respiratory therapists help people with heart and lung problems. They make decisions that directly affect their patients' well-being. They work in hospitals, outpatient clinics, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and patient homes. Their patients range from newborn babies to elderly adults, and from people who help care for themselves to critically ill people on mechanical life support. Respiratory therapists help people with a variety of conditions such as asthma, cystic fibrosis, pneumonia, heart failure, and smoking-related illnesses (emphysema and chronic bronchitis); they take care of premature babies who cannot breathe on their own; they care for people with traumatic injuries requiring mechanical breathing assistance; and they respond to all "code blue" emergencies.

Respiratory therapists have long-term, day-to-day contact with their patients, which allow trusting relationships to develop. Therapists obtain medical histories through interviews, perform heart and lung physical examinations, interpret chest x-rays and lab data, and set treatment goals. They assess the patient's response to treatment, and change it if necessary. They interact with the family. As part of the health care team, therapists communicate and work closely with physicians and other health care professionals. In critical care and emergency areas, respiratory therapists insert artificial airways, draw and analyze blood, perform CPR, set up and manage mechanical ventilation, and perform diagnostic procedures to check heart and lung function. They help plan for the patient's hospital discharge to make sure any ongoing respiratory needs will be met outside of the hospital. In pulmonary rehabilitation clinics, respiratory therapists test tolerance to physical activity and prescribe exercise. In the home, they teach patients about their medications, how to control their diseases, how to treat themselves effectively, and how to operate respiratory equipment safely. Finally, respiratory therapists promote community health in the public schools and other arenas, teaching young people and their parents how to manage asthma, and educating youth about tobacco's harmful effects.