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Research Article

Role of Radiologic Technologists in Image Quality Optimization and Repeat Imaging Reduction in Diagnostic Radiology

Abbas Mohammed Abbas Alshalan[1]*, Faiz Farhan J Alenezi[2], Alshammari, Adel Mufadhi F[3], Bandar Obaydullah Amiq Alanazi[4], Khamis Abdullah Ayesh Al Balawi[5], Hajer Saleh Abdulla Alshmmari[6], Munawir Ayed Munawir Alshammari[7], Owaid Maazir A Alhzmi[8], Zaid Odhayb Sager Al Anazi[9], Alotaibi, Saber Hamoud K[10], Bader Nasser Marzouq Alrashdi[11]

[1]Radiology Technician – Long-Term Care Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
* **Corresponding Author Email:** Amalshalan@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0041-7850

[2]Radiology Technician – Rafha General Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Rafha, Northern Borders, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: fafalenezi@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0040-0050

[3]Radiology Technician – Sharaf Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Hail, Hail, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: adelmf55@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0041-1050

[4]Radiology Technician – Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: uhlr9965@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0042-2050

[5]Radiology Technician – Abu Rakah General Hospital, Tabuk Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Tabuk, Tabuk, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: kameisa@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0043-3050

[6]Radiology Specialist – Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaed Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: hasalshmmari@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0044-4050

[7]Radiology Specialist – Sharaf Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Hail, Hail Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: munawira@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0045-5050

[8]Radiology Technician – Maternity and Children Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: owaid7070@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0046-6050

[9]Radiology Technician – Rafha General Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Rafha, Northern Borders, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: ZAlanazi@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0048-7050

[10]Radiology Technician – Children's Hospital, Taif Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Taif, Makkah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: kidimees@hotmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0049-8050

[11]Radiology Technician – Al-Hayit General Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Al-Hayit, Hail, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: BaNAlrashdi@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0033-9050

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Abstract:

Radiologic technologists serve as the essential frontline operators and decision-makers in diagnostic imaging, directly responsible for producing high-quality images while minimizing avoidable repeat examinations. Their role encompasses a sophisticated integration of technical expertise and patient-centered care. Through precise selection of exposure parameters, accurate patient positioning, and effective communication, they establish the foundational conditions for diagnostic accuracy. By mastering advanced imaging technology and adhering to optimized protocols, they harness tools like exposure indices and dose modulation to balance image quality with patient safety. Furthermore, their diligent execution of quality assurance tests and active participation in repeat analysis programs foster a culture of continuous improvement and radiation safety. Ultimately, the technologist's judgment at every step—from patient assessment to image processing—is the critical determinant in achieving diagnostic efficacy, enhancing patient outcomes by reducing unnecessary radiation exposure, decreasing anxiety, and improving departmental workflow efficiency through first-time imaging success.

1. Introduction

Diagnostic radiology stands as a cornerstone of modern medicine, providing an indispensable window into the human body that guides diagnosis, treatment planning, and therapeutic intervention. The images produced within radiology departments—be it through conventional radiography, computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), or ultrasound—form the basis upon which critical clinical decisions are made. Consequently, the quality of these images is not merely a technical concern but a fundamental determinant of patient care quality, safety, and outcomes. High-quality diagnostic images are characterized by optimal contrast, resolution, and detail, devoid of artifacts that could obscure pathology or mimic disease. They ensure that radiologists can interpret findings with high confidence, leading to accurate diagnoses, appropriate management, and, ultimately, improved patient prognosis. Conversely, suboptimal image quality carries significant risks, including missed diagnoses, misinterpretations, delayed treatment, and the potential for unnecessary additional investigations, all of which contribute to increased healthcare costs and patient anxiety (1, 2).

A direct and critically important consequence of suboptimal image quality is the need for repeat imaging. Repeat imaging, or the act of re-acquiring a radiographic examination due to an unacceptable initial image, represents a multifaceted problem within healthcare systems globally. While sometimes clinically justified due to patient condition changes or the need for additional projections, a substantial proportion of repeats are attributable to technical errors, patient positioning issues, or suboptimal exposure factor selection. These avoidable repeats carry a significant burden. From a patient-centric perspective, they result in additional radiation exposure, a concern particularly salient in pediatric populations and patients undergoing numerous studies over time. This exposure contributes to cumulative radiation dose, elevating the lifetime attributable risk of stochastic effects such as cancer (3). Furthermore, repeat imaging prolongs examination time, increases patient discomfort and anxiety, and can delay diagnosis and treatment. From an institutional and economic standpoint, repeat imaging represents a substantial inefficiency. It consumes valuable resources, including technologist and radiologist time, machine utilization capacity, and supplies, while generating no additional revenue, thereby straining departmental workflow and increasing operational costs (4, 5).

Within this critical framework of image quality and repeat reduction, the radiologic technologist (RT) emerges not as a passive operator of complex machinery, but as the central, pivotal professional responsible for the genesis of the diagnostic image. The role of the RT extends far beyond the simple execution of a protocol; it encompasses a sophisticated synthesis of scientific knowledge, technical expertise, patient care skills, and critical decision-making. Every action taken by the technologist, from the initial patient assessment to the final image processing parameter selection, directly influences the diagnostic integrity of the examination. They are the first and most crucial line of defense against image quality deficiencies and the primary agent in the mission to minimize avoidable repeat examinations (6).

The modern RT operates in an environment of rapidly advancing technology. Digital radiography (DR), computed radiography (CR), advanced CT iterative reconstruction algorithms, and sophisticated MRI sequences have transformed the imaging landscape. While these technologies offer powerful tools for quality optimization, they also introduce new complexities. The "forgiving" nature of digital systems can mask suboptimal technique, potentially leading to dose creep if not carefully managed. This technological evolution elevates, rather than diminishes, the technologist's role. It demands a deeper understanding of the physics behind the image, the parameters of digital processing, and the judicious application of advanced tools to consistently produce diagnostic excellence. The technologist must be a master of technology, not a servant to it, leveraging these systems to achieve the optimal balance between image quality and patient safety (7, 8).

2. Technical Mastery: The Foundation of Image Quality

The production of a diagnostic radiographic image is a precise scientific process, governed by the principles of physics and engineering. The radiologic technologist's primary instrument in this process is their command over exposure factors and geometric principles. Mastery of these technical elements forms the non-negotiable foundation upon which all image quality optimization is built. The selection of kilovoltage peak (kVp), milliamperage-second (mAs), source-to-image distance (SID), and collimation is not a rote procedure but a series of critical decisions tailored to each unique patient and clinical indication.

Kilovoltage peak (kVp) primarily controls the penetrating power of the X-ray beam and influences image contrast. A higher kVp produces a more penetrating beam with lower subject contrast but allows for a reduction in mAs, thereby decreasing patient dose. Conversely, a lower kVp provides higher subject contrast, which is desirable for visualizing soft tissue differences, but may require an increase in mAs. The technologist must select a kVp that optimally balances contrast requirements with dose minimization. For instance, a chest radiograph requiring visualization of both lung parenchyma and mediastinal structures often utilizes a higher kVp technique, while a skeletal survey for detail in trabecular bone might employ a lower kVp. Incorrect kVp selection is a common culprit for non-diagnostic images; too low results in excessively dark, high-contrast images with inadequate penetration, while too high produces a "flat," low-contrast image lacking in diagnostic detail, often leading to a repeat (9, 10).

Milliamperage-second (mAs) directly governs the quantity of X-ray photons produced and is the primary factor controlling image density or overall blackening. In digital systems, mAs is the key determinant of image noise. Insufficient mAs results in a "quantum mottle" or noisy image, where the signal-to-noise ratio is too low to confidently discern anatomical details or subtle pathologies. This is a frequent cause of repeats in all modalities, particularly in larger patients where standard exposure factors prove inadequate. The technologist must adjust mAs based on patient thickness, composition, and the specific body part. The implementation of anatomical programming and exposure index feedback systems on digital equipment provides crucial guidance, but the technologist's judgment in overriding or fine-tuning these automated settings for atypical patients is essential to prevent repeats (11, 12).

Geometric principles are equally vital. Correct source-to-image distance (SID) is necessary to maintain predictable magnification and image sharpness. Proper collimation is a critical and often underemphasized skill. Tight collimation restricts the primary beam to the area of clinical interest, dramatically reducing scatter radiation. This, in turn, improves image contrast and detail while minimizing patient dose. In digital imaging, collimation also plays a key role in ensuring accurate automatic exposure control (AEC) function and proper histogram analysis for image processing. Failure to collimate appropriately can lead to inaccurate exposure, poor contrast, and unnecessary radiation to adjacent tissues, potentially degrading image quality to a non-diagnostic level (13). Furthermore, the elimination of motion artifact rests squarely on the technologist's ability to provide clear breathing instructions, use appropriate immobilization devices, and employ the shortest possible exposure time. Patient motion, whether voluntary or involuntary, remains one of the most common reasons for image blurring and subsequent repeats across all modalities, from plain radiography to MRI (14).

3. The Human Element: Patient Positioning, Preparation, and Communication

While technical parameters form the scientific core, the human element of radiologic technology is equally determinative of success. The patient is not a standardized phantom but a unique individual with varying anatomy, mobility, comprehension, and anxiety levels. The technologist's expertise in patient interaction, positioning, and preparation is therefore a direct determinant of image quality and a primary factor in avoiding repeats. This aspect of the role transforms a technical procedure into a patient-centered care episode.

Accurate and reproducible patient positioning is the single most critical step in obtaining a diagnostic image after correct exposure factor selection. Every radiographic projection has a standardized positioning criteria designed to optimally demonstrate specific anatomical structures and relationships. Deviation from these standards can lead to misleading images, obscured pathology, or the introduction of diagnostic artifacts. For example, a poorly positioned oblique cervical spine may fail to visualize the neural foramina, or an incorrectly angled CXR may project the clavicles over the lung apices. The technologist must utilize anatomical landmarks, palpation skills, and positioning aids to achieve precise alignment. This requires a deep understanding of three-dimensional anatomy and its two-dimensional radiographic representation. In trauma or intensive care settings, where patient mobility is severely restricted, this skill is elevated to an art form, as the technologist must creatively use pillows, sponges, and other devices to achieve a diagnostic image without exacerbating injury, often avoiding the need for a technically compromised repeat (15, 16).

Patient preparation is a broad domain that encompasses both physical and psychological readiness. Physically, this involves ensuring proper attire (removal of radiopaque objects like jewelry, clothing with zippers/metal), providing clear instructions for breath-holding, and administering contrast media when required according to established safety protocols. A metallic artifact from a forgotten necklace or a motion artifact from an unclear breathing command can render an otherwise technically perfect image non-diagnostic. Psychologically, preparation involves effective communication to alleviate anxiety and secure cooperation. An anxious, claustrophobic, or poorly informed patient is more likely to move, fail to follow instructions, or terminate an examination prematurely. The technologist's ability to explain the procedure in understandable terms, establish rapport, and provide empathetic reassurance is not merely a courtesy but a quality assurance strategy. It directly increases the likelihood of a successful first-time acquisition (17, 18).

Communication extends beyond the patient to include other healthcare team members. For complex studies, such as interventional procedures, intra-operative imaging, or studies on critically ill patients, the technologist must effectively collaborate with radiologists, nurses, anesthesiologists, and surgeons. Clarifying the clinical question ensures the correct protocol is followed. Informing the team of patient limitations or contraindications prevents protocol errors. This interdisciplinary communication is vital for tailoring the examination to the specific clinical need, thereby producing a diagnostically useful image on the first attempt and avoiding repeats due to inappropriate technique or incomplete examination (19).

4. Leveraging Technology and Protocol Adherence

The modern radiology department is equipped with highly sophisticated imaging systems, each with a plethora of customizable settings and post-processing tools. The radiologic technologist's role has evolved to include the expert operation and optimization of these technologies. Far from being automated, these systems require skilled human oversight to harness their full potential for quality optimization and repeat reduction. The technologist acts as the intelligent interface between the patient, the clinical question, and the imaging technology.

A profound understanding of digital image receptors and processing algorithms is paramount. In digital radiography, the technologist must be fluent in concepts such as the exposure index (EI), detector dose indicator (DDI), or signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) specific to their equipment. These metrics provide immediate, quantitative feedback on the exposure delivered to the detector. A technologist who actively monitors and responds to these indicators can correct for under- or over-exposure tendencies before they become habitual, ensuring consistent image quality and preventing repeats due to exposure errors. Furthermore, understanding the impact of post-processing parameters—such as edge enhancement, dynamic range compression, and look-up tables (LUTs)—allows the technologist to fine-tune the displayed image to optimally present the relevant anatomy for the diagnostic task, potentially salvaging an otherwise marginal acquisition and avoiding a repeat (20, 21).

Protocol optimization and adherence form another critical technological domain. Each imaging system comes with a set of vendor-provided protocols, but these are often starting points. Technologists, in collaboration with medical physicists and radiologists, play a key role in developing, testing, and refining department-specific protocols that balance image quality with radiation dose (in the case of CT and radiography) or scan time (in MRI). A well-designed protocol for an abdominal CT, for example, specifies the correct phase of contrast, slice thickness, reconstruction kernel, and dose modulation settings for a given indication like trauma versus oncology staging. Strict adherence to these protocols ensures consistency, which is vital for both diagnostic accuracy and longitudinal comparison of studies over time. Deviations from protocol, whether intentional or accidental, can produce non-standard images that are difficult to

interpret or compare, potentially necessitating a repeat scan to obtain the required information (22, 23).
The integration of advanced technologies like Computer-Aided Detection (CAD), dose monitoring software, and, increasingly, Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the workflow further expands the technologist's toolkit. AI algorithms are now being deployed for tasks such as image quality assessment, automated positioning feedback, and protocol selection. For instance, an AI system can analyze a scout image and alert the technologist to potential suboptimal positioning or collimation before the full exposure is made. The technologist's role is to understand, validate, and effectively utilize the outputs of these systems, integrating them into their professional judgment rather than being replaced by them. This synergy between human expertise and artificial intelligence holds immense promise for driving repeat rates to new minima by intercepting errors in real-time (24, 25).

5. Quality Assurance and the Culture of Safety

The pursuit of optimal image quality and minimal repeat rates cannot be an ad-hoc endeavor; it must be institutionalized through a robust, systematic quality assurance (QA) and radiation safety program. Radiologic technologists are not just participants in these programs; they are their primary executors and frontline ambassadors. Their daily engagement with QA processes is what translates policy into practice and fosters a pervasive culture of safety and excellence within the department.
At the operational level, technologists are responsible for performing and documenting a wide array of routine QA tests. This includes daily visual checks and more detailed weekly or monthly tests on imaging equipment. For radiographic rooms, this involves verifying the consistency of the AEC system, the accuracy of the collimator light field, and the cleanliness of image receptors. In fluoroscopy, checking dose rates and image intensifier function is critical. In CT, daily air calibrations and water phantom checks are standard technologist duties. These proactive measures identify equipment malfunctions or performance drifts before they manifest as widespread image quality issues or necessitate large-scale repeat examinations. A technologist who diligently performs these checks is effectively preventing technical failures that could impact numerous patients (26, 27).
Active participation in repeat image analysis (RIA) programs is perhaps the most direct educational tool for reducing repeats. In a structured RIA program, every repeated image is logged, and the reason for the repeat is categorized (e.g., positioning, motion, exposure, artifact, clinical request). Technologists regularly review this data, often in departmental meetings. This process moves the discussion from individual blame to systemic improvement. By analyzing trends—for example, a high rate of repeats for lateral knee projections due to rotation—the team can identify specific knowledge or technique gaps. Targeted re-education, demonstration of proper technique, or even protocol modification can then be implemented. This closed-loop feedback system empowers technologists to learn from errors and continuously refine their practice, making the reduction of repeats a shared, data-driven goal (28, 29).
Furthermore, technologists are the key practitioners of the "As Low As Reasonably Achievable" (ALARA) principle in radiation protection. Their technical choices directly dictate the patient's radiation dose. By selecting appropriate exposure factors, utilizing proper collimation, employing gonadal shielding when appropriate (following current guidelines), and using dose-reduction technologies like iterative reconstruction in CT, they are the guardians of patient safety. This commitment to ALARA is intrinsically linked to image quality optimization, as a properly exposed image obtained with optimal technique is inherently a low-dose image. A strong, tech-led safety culture minimizes the risk of both diagnostic errors from poor quality and unnecessary radiation from avoidable repeats or excessive technique (30).

6. Education, Professional Development, and Leadership

The dynamic nature of medical imaging, with its constant technological innovations and evolving best practices, mandates a commitment to lifelong learning. The initial competency of a radiologic technologist, gained through accredited educational programs, is merely the foundation. Sustained image quality excellence and the ongoing pursuit of repeat reduction are fueled by continuous professional development and leadership within the profession.
Formal education provides the essential bedrock of knowledge in radiation physics, anatomy, pathology, patient care, and imaging procedures. However, the clinical environment presents complexities that textbooks cannot fully capture. Therefore, structured clinical mentoring for new graduates and students is vital. Experienced technologists pass on tacit knowledge—the "tricks of the trade" for positioning difficult patients,

troubleshooting equipment quirks, and communicating with specific patient populations. This mentorship embeds a standard of excellence and a mindset of first-time accuracy from the very beginning of a technologist's career (32). Pursuing advanced credentials, such as post-primary certifications in CT, MRI, mammography, or quality management, represents a deep investment in specialization. A technologist with the Registered Computed Tomography (RCT) credential, for example, possesses an expert-level understanding of cross-sectional anatomy, contrast dynamics, and dose modulation techniques that directly translates into higher-quality scans and fewer protocol-related repeats in the CT suite (30).

Beyond individual skill acquisition, technologists exercise leadership in quality improvement (QI) initiatives. They often lead or participate in QI projects aimed at reducing specific types of repeats, streamlining workflows to minimize errors, or implementing new technologies. Their frontline perspective is invaluable for identifying practical problems and testing viable solutions. For instance, a technologist-led project might involve creating new positioning aids for pediatric patients, designing a checklist for complex MRI exams to prevent missed sequences, or piloting a new software tool for image quality feedback. By taking ownership of such projects, technologists move from being passive recipients of policy to active architects of a higher-quality imaging service (31). This professional engagement fosters a sense of accountability and pride, reinforcing the understanding that their expertise is the final, decisive variable in the image creation chain before interpretation by the radiologist.

7. Conclusion

The journey of a diagnostic image, from the initial patient referral to the final radiologic report, is a complex chain of events with multiple stakeholders. However, at its pivotal point of creation stands the radiologic technologist. Their role is profoundly multifaceted, blending hard science with compassionate care, technical precision with adaptive problem-solving, and procedural adherence with critical thinking. As this analysis has demonstrated, the technologist's influence on image quality optimization and repeat imaging reduction is comprehensive and decisive.

Through technical mastery of exposure factors and geometric principles, they lay the physical foundation for a diagnostic image. Through expert patient positioning, preparation, and communication, they master the human variables that can compromise it. By skillfully leveraging advanced technologies and adhering to optimized protocols, they harness the power of modern tools to consistently produce excellence. Through diligent execution of quality assurance and a steadfast commitment to radiation safety, they institutionalize a culture of continuous improvement and patient protection. Finally, through ongoing education and professional leadership, they ensure that their practice evolves with the field, perpetually raising the standard of care.

Repeat imaging is not an inevitable byproduct of diagnostic radiology; it is, to a significant degree, a preventable outcome. Its prevention is fundamentally dependent on the knowledge, skill, and vigilance of the radiologic technologist. Every repeat avoided represents a direct enhancement of patient safety through dose reduction, an improvement in patient experience, and an increase in departmental efficiency. Therefore, investing in the education, empowerment, and recognition of radiologic technologists is not merely an operational consideration but a strategic imperative for any healthcare institution committed to diagnostic excellence, patient-centered care, and operational sustainability. They are, unequivocally, the essential stewards of the diagnostic image, and their expertise is the cornerstone upon which reliable, high-quality radiological diagnosis is built. The optimization of image quality and the minimization of repeat imaging are, ultimately, the most tangible manifestations of their professional expertise and commitment.

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