

## Seeing Colors In Restrooms And Beyond

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### Feature

The multi-faceted benefits of a color-coded program.

*by: Rich Parillo*

Before reading this article, please take a couple of moments to answer the following questions:

- Do you clean or manage facilities where cross contamination is a concern?
- Do any of your cleaning workers have trouble speaking and reading English fluently?
- Have restroom cleaning tools ever been used to clean desks, ledges and other areas of your facilities?
- Does your company have a high cleaning worker turnover?
- Do you clean or manage daycare centers, restaurants, medical facilities or nursing homes?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you could benefit — and possibly reduce health care problems — by using color-coded microfiber cleaning cloths and mop heads.

In fact, today, with increased public health concerns regarding H1N1 influenza (swine flu), methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and other potentially life-threatening viruses, many facilities have considered or have already color-coded all cleaning-related products.

### Definitions And A Little History

Color-coding, as it applies to the professional cleaning industry, can be defined as the principle of using color to designate certain cleaning tools or procedures to specific tasks or areas.

In most situations where it is incorporated, a few colors are selected, with each color denoting either a particular duty, such as cleaning toilets and urinals, or a specific area, such as restrooms.

Although details and procedures can vary, especially here in the United States, a color-coding approach developed by the British Institute of Cleaning Sciences (BICS) for cleaning professionals and facility managers is an example of how these colors can be used for specific tasks:

- **Red:** For cleaning and disinfecting toilets, urinals and high-risk or hazardous restroom areas

- **Yellow:** For cleaning showers, mirrors and other low-risk restroom areas
- **Green:** For cleaning areas where food is handled and stored
- **Blue:** For all other areas and surface types, but never in areas where red, yellow or green tools are mandated. In the United States, blue is often used to clean glass and for general cleaning in restrooms.

When it comes to color-coding in the professional cleaning industry, there really is no universal standard.

This is somewhat surprising because the industry has been developing standards and "best practice" procedures for all types of cleaning duties.

Even in hospitals and medical facilities, where color-coding was first developed and is used most extensively, the procedure used in one facility may not carry over to another.

One of the goals of color-coding, and one of the key reasons it was developed in medical facilities, is to help avoid mistakes and to promote safety and training.

For instance, at one time, intravenous (IV) injections filled with sodium chloride and those with potassium chloride looked exactly the same.

The problem was that potassium chloride, if used by mistake, could cause heart failure and even death.

Now, these items are color-coded to avoid the error.

Medical facilities have expanded their use of color-coding from drug identification to a broad set of uses, including:

- Washing machines are color-coded to designate what items may be put in them
- Patients wear colored wristbands to alert caretakers about whether they can have blood transfusions, what allergies they may have and even whether they have given DNR (do not resuscitate) orders.
- Red plastic bags are used to indicate hazardous/infectious waste.

### **Use In The Professional Cleaning Industry**

More than a decade ago, the BICS worked directly with cleaning contractors, manufacturers, distributors and facility managers to develop a color-coding system for cleaning; it is used in many facilities throughout England.

"The purpose and reasoning behind the system is simple: To prevent cross contamination," says Mike Sweeny, director of BICS.

Sweeny explains that by separating supplies used to clean urinals and toilets, for instance, from tools used to clean food preparation areas, contamination is virtually eliminated.

In some cases, cleaning contractors place decals on specific tools and equipment, designating their use.

In other cases, the actual tool used may be a specific color.

An often used example of this is microfiber cleaning cloths and mop heads.

These products are manufactured in specific colors, making them easy to use in a color-coding cleaning system.

However, BICS suggests that most cleaning tools, from floor machines and vacuum cleaners to brushes and hand tools, can also be color-coded based on use and purpose.

In addition to helping stop the spread of disease and contamination that might come from using the wrong tool in the wrong area, color-coding helps eliminate literacy barriers because the use of color is not dependent on language.

Supervisors report that when a color-coding system is in place, it is easier to ensure that steps are being taken to protect the health of building occupants.

### **Color-coding In The United States**

England and other areas in Europe and parts of Asia appear to be ahead of the U.S. when it comes to color-coding cleaning tools and procedures.

Considering all of its benefits and the ease of implementation, it is somewhat surprising that color-coding has not become more commonplace in the U.S.

Possibly, this is because other areas of the world have been more affected by epidemics and public health issues than we have, and they have learned in the process that color-coding can help prevent these issues.

Although many U.S. cleaning contractors do follow color-coding guidelines similar to those listed earlier, contractors and facility managers will often devise their own color combinations to meet their specific needs.

This means no standard is in place, which can result in confusion and mistakes.

It is hoped that — especially after our recent scare over the swine flu — the industry's leading cleaning associations and more of its experts will hear the call and encourage the establishment

of a color-coding standard to help protect public health and improve the effectiveness of cleaning in the United States.

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