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FEATURE ARTICLES

Raising the Bar With Green Cleaning By Mike Nelson

While green cleaning does involve the use of environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals, it is just one element in a comprehensive green cleaning program. As with any system, unless all the pieces are in place and functioning properly, it is difficult to take full advantage of program benefits.

Before discussing the full ramifications of a green cleaning system, managers of healthcare facilities should understand the benefits of adopting such a program. These benefits can include:

- An improvement in the rate of nosocomial infections
- A reduction in allergic reactions or illness among young children and patients with weakened immune systems as a result of cleaning products used in the facility
- An improvement in overall patient outcomes
- Enhancement of community relations
- Recognition by patients, doctors and staff of cutting-edge cleaning technologies and building operations

Furthermore, some facilities have witnessed significant but often less tangible benefits of „going green.‰ For instance, as a result of a lower staff illness and injury rate, workers, compensation and other insurance costs can begin to decline once green cleaning programs are instituted. Reducing illness also brings lower worker absenteeism, which can improve productivity and cut costs for any type of facility.

Program Components

Because the benefits abound, facility managers wanting to build or improve their green cleaning programs must look at these programs more holistically, realizing they involve much more than using environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals. A green cleaning program should start at the front door, with 15 to 20 feet of high-quality matting systems placed inside and outside major entries. According to a recent study by the International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA), up to 24 pounds of dirt can be tracked in by just 1,000 people coming through an entrance over a 20-day work period. The same study noted that removing just one pound of soil can cost a facility as much as \$500 in labor and equipment.

A large healthcare facility may have literally thousands of people entering every day. To prevent the tracking of soil into the facility, consider using an enhanced matting system to help trap soil at entryways and prevent potential contamination. This will save the facility considerable sums of money in



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cleaning costs.

Similarly, an effective green cleaning program includes high-filtration vacuum systems. There is no point in using environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals if the vacuum cleaners being used on floors and carpets spew dust, dirt and contaminants into the air. This harms the health of cleaning workers as well as facility occupants.

Green vacuum cleaners often have high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters that trap virtually all contaminants. Selecting these machines has become much easier in the past couple of years. The Carpet and Rug Institute's Green Label Program lists vacuum cleaners that efficiently remove soil from carpets while protecting indoor air quality. For information about these machines, visit the institute's Web site at carpet-rug.com.

Along with vacuum cleaners, greener carpet cleaning systems have also evolved as a result of using environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals and low-moisture extractors. These systems use one gallon or less of water per minute when extracting carpets. This compares to as much as three or four gallons of water per minute with older, more conventional machines. In addition, these machines have advanced multistage vacuum systems that effectively remove moisture from carpets after extraction. This helps prevent possible growth of mold or mildew. In fact, tests have shown that carpets can dry in less than an hour with some of these machines as compared to several hours or even days with more conventional extractors.

Machines used to clean and polish floors are always a top concern in a healthcare facility. Studies by the Harvard University School of Public Health have found that all the benefits of a more environmentally friendly floor product can be eliminated the first time a floor is cleaned using traditional floor care chemicals and cleaning equipment. Some of the chemicals used in floor care are the most powerful and harmful in the cleaning industry.

Furthermore, the use of the floor cleaning equipment itself can have detrimental effects. When floors are buffed or polished, the machine is actually „sanding“ the very top layer of floor finish. This removes scuffs and soils and helps shine the floor. However, it also releases dust, which can become airborne and potentially harmful to indoor air quality. More advanced, greener floor cleaning machines have built-in vacuum systems with filters that help trap these contaminants. In addition, some new floor machines, such as cylindrical machines, use less water and fewer chemicals than older machines do, which helps protect the indoor environment.

Beyond Equipment

Many of the tools, supplies and paper products cleaning professionals use in facilities are also environmentally preferable and play a significant role in green cleaning. For instance, paper products from some of the largest paper companies are now certified. These products are made with a high level of postconsumer recycled content and have eliminated or minimized the use of many dyes and chemicals, especially those normally used in the bleaching process.

The same is true of recently introduced green hand soaps. These soaps perform as well as or better than conventional hand cleaners; are biodegradable and cause limited toxicity to aquatic life; are packaged in recyclable packaging, ideally incorporating recycled content; and have eliminated ingredients considered likely to negatively impact health and the environment.

Finally, microfiber, often used to clean medical facilities, is considered a green cleaning tool because it is absorbent. This makes it more effective at cleaning and removing soils and contaminants from surfaces. Also, microfiber works effectively with a minimal amount of chemicals. The goal of green cleaning is to use environmentally preferable cleaning products and, if possible, use only enough of a chemical to perform a cleaning task satisfactorily.

How to Begin

The first step in implementing a green cleaning program typically involves consulting a facility's janitorial-sanitation (jansan) distributor. Astute jansan distributors are well aware of the importance of green cleaning and know how to help their clients transfer from conventional cleaning to green cleaning. Often, these distributors are viewed as consultants and play a very active role in the daily operations and upkeep of their clients, facilities.

These distributors can assess the cleaning products and equipment currently used to clean the facility and, if necessary, recommend green cleaning system products as part of a complete cleaning audit. Cleaning products and equipment are assessed during the audit, and the cleaning system is evaluated from an environmental perspective.

The audit takes into consideration who uses the facility and how the facility is used ~ major considerations for a healthcare facility ~ and designs a cleaning program with this in mind. Often teams are created, including building management, staff and the custodial crew, that evaluate the products, procedures, strong points and weak areas of the current cleaning program.

The audit also includes an assessment of training for cleaning workers. When a green cleaning system is implemented, custodial workers are often taught how to use the products. This is also a perfect time to review cleaning procedures and processes so that the most productive and thorough cleaning systems are implemented at the facility.

Is It Really Green?

Several years ago, facility managers, distributors and custodial workers were never really sure if a product was indeed green. This was because some manufacturers simply „self-declared“ their products green based on accurate and sometimes less-than-accurate advice. Fortunately, this is no longer the case, which has proved a benefit for not only consumers but manufacturers as well.

Today, we have certification organizations, which are third-party organizations that evaluate and certify green products and have established guidelines for manufacturing an environmentally preferable cleaning chemical or piece of equipment.

For many cleaning products, facility managers can turn to the EcoLogo program or Green Seal, both of which are independent, third-party certification organizations. In order to be certified, the products are put through a battery of tests evaluating how they are manufactured and the ingredients used.

Conclusion

The issue for most healthcare facilities is no longer whether or not to consider green cleaning but rather when it should begin. It is important to realize the many elements involved in the process and to make sure all are in

place to make the program effective. Along with the many health benefits, implementing a green cleaning program helps raise the bar and professionalism of cleaning professionals. This is because cleaning workers realize more than ever before how important their role is in keeping buildings clean and our environment healthy.

Green Cleaning Tips

- Ensure that vacuum cleaners are in good working order.
- Empty or replace vacuum bags when half full.
- Vacuum carpets daily to minimize the need for deep cleaning.
- Always apply the cleaner in a stream or onto the cloth.
- Use properly diluted products, preferably through a dispensing system.
- Make sure all spray bottles are properly labeled.
- Never mix cleaning products together.
- Periodically machine-scrub restroom floors with a disinfectant.
- Make sure appropriate dwell times for disinfectants are followed.
- Use microfiber cloths when possible; use color-coded cloths by area.

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