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Greening Hospital Floors

By **Huong Pham** — posted 08/05/2011



The health care industry is one of the few industries in this country that seems to just keep on growing. And because budgets for many schools and universities have been sliced—including expenditures for cleaning tools and equipment—many distributors have put a lot more marketing emphasis on the health care industry.

One thing health care facilities are going to put more emphasis on in coming years is going green. This is an opportunity for astute, green-educated distributors to guide their health care customers from conventional to environmentally preferable cleaning. Their guidance will be of considerable value when it comes to green floor care. While an office building, even a school, may have a fairly even mix of carpets and hard-surface floors, medical facilities, especially hospitals, tend to weigh heavily toward tile and other hard floors.

One of the big challenges with green floor care is finding products that meet the performance standards of conventional floor care products. It is unfortunate that some of the most potentially harmful ingredients in conventional floor care chemicals are also the most effective in giving floors a lasting, durable, high-gloss shine. For example, in one situation, a green finish was applied to a hospital floor. Normally, using conventional finishes, the shine could easily be maintained by regular buffing and burnishing for several months, even years. However, in just a matter of weeks in this case, the green finish was fading away.

In another somewhat strange situation, environmentally preferable floor care cleaning products were used in a section of a large medical/office facility. Shortly after their application, it was noticed the electrical outlets and coverings installed into the floor as well as some baseboards began discoloring. Apparently, there was a chemical reaction from the green floor finish that discolored them.

Selecting the Right Green Floor care Products

Although an experienced distributor may have helped prevent the problems these two health care facilities experienced, it cannot be denied there is some trial and error involved when selecting a green floor chemical or finish. The first step in the selection process is to choose products that have been certified green by one of the important and respected certification bodies such as EcoLogo™ and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Design for the Environment Program—or DfE.

The next step is testing the selected products. Some distributors refer to this as a "cleaning challenge." Basically, it entails using one set of floor care chemicals/finishes in one area of the facility and another set of products in a different area. After several weeks, the distributor and housekeeping manager should compare notes. For instance:



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- Which products were the easiest to apply?
- Which were the easiest to maintain?
- How buffable/burinishable were the products?
- Were their odors, chemical reactions, or similar unexpected problems using the products?
- After several weeks, does the finish look like it is holding up or is it fading?

Several years ago, the facility manager of a government office building tested 23 green finishes before he found one he was satisfied with. Fortunately, because the technology has improved considerably in recent years, it is doubtful this many products will have to be tested and evaluated. But putting two or three products through the challenge should be sufficient.

The Equipment Component

As distributors know and will likely advise their health care customers, the other half of green floor care maintenance involves the equipment used. Older floor care machines, such as autoscrubbers, were simply not manufactured with the environmental focus we have today. In some cases, these older machines should be replaced.

Focusing specifically on auto scrubbers, some of the green features and technologies to recommend for health care clients include:

- **Noise:** The Indoor Environmental Quality (IEQ) Credit 3.4: Green Cleaning-Sustainable Cleaning Equipment requires that "powered floor equipment be ergonomically designed to minimize vibration, noise and user fatigue." Machines with an operating noise level less than 70 decibels help protect the health and safety of the cleaning professionals using the machines.
- **Low moisture:** A low-moisture machine typically has an integrated parabolic squeegee system mounted right behind the pad. This ensures that the solution is contained and instantly recovered even when the machine is turning.
- **Less chemical and water:** Some recently introduced environmentally friendly autoscrubbers are designed to work effectively using less water and chemical than older machines. This also makes them a more sustainable option.
- **Gel batteries:** Gel batteries are essentially maintenance-free and are more environmentally preferable than older battery technologies.
- **Ergonomics:** The handle should be adjustable, minimizing worker fatigue and potential injuries. Remember that protecting the environment starts with the cleaning worker.

It is very likely that over time, more green floor care technologies will be introduced. This has already happened in the chemical industry, which has made significant strides in just the past few years. As to equipment, we can expect these machines to follow suit, becoming even higher performing, more effective, and increasingly protective of the environment.



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