

## **Green Cleaning and the Health Care Industry**

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(HealthNewsDigest.com) - The health care industry encompasses many segments, from hospitals and clinics to long-term living and rehabilitation centers. But virtually all of these facilities have been relatively slow to adopt environmentally preferable cleaning products, especially when compared to the speed with which schools and offices have embraced Green cleaning.

There are several reasons for this trend. For one, many hospitals are worried about nosocomial--or hospital-acquired--infections, which have been on the rise.

Hospital administrators typically do not want to risk making any changes, Green or otherwise, that might jeopardize patient health.

Another reason is legal. Federal and state regulations mandate the use of certain types of cleaning products--mostly disinfectants--in specific areas of medical facilities. For instance, emergency care and surgical areas are typically required by law to use specific types of disinfectants. Unfortunately, Green alternatives often do not exist for these types of products; in fact, at this time, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations prohibit the use of the word Green in regard to such products in the United States.

Lastly, some health care facility administrators still believe that Green products are more costly than conventional cleaning agents and do not perform as well. This may have been true of Green products 15 to 20 years ago, but it certainly is not so today.

### **Understanding Green Cleaning**

The main concern regarding most conventional chemical products in use in health care facilities--and why so many medical locations are now adopting or considering a Greener cleaning program--is that these products are made from ingredients known to be harmful to humans. Many commonly used cleaning agents, from conventional window cleaners to all-purpose cleaners, have been known to cause skin rashes, respiratory problems, and eye, nose, and throat irritation. The severity of these reactions can vary from person to person; however, the intensity of the problem tends to increase over time and with the extent of exposure.

Additionally, some of the antimicrobial agents and disinfectants used extensively in health care settings are among the most environmentally harmful cleaning products on the market. These products have served us well, helping to stop the spread of disease and contamination, but we must also be aware of the environmental problems they can cause. In fact, the EPA, which

regulates antimicrobial cleaners and disinfectants in the United States, classifies these products as pesticides, with some having a more adverse impact on the user and the environment than others.

Green cleaning can be defined very simply as “cleaning that protects health without harming the environment.” More broadly, it means using cleaning tools, chemicals, equipment, and other products that have a reduced negative impact on the environment, the user of the products, and building occupants. Chemicals that have been certified or meet current Green certification criteria are used as part of Green cleaning programs. HEPA-filtered vacuum cleaners and a new generation of floor care machines designed to use water and chemicals more responsibly are also important equipment for Green cleaning.

Of course, Green cleaning is still evolving. It now involves more than just using products that are less harmful to the environment. It also means using products that help promote sustainability. This applies to the way a product is made (using natural and renewable resources), the way it is packaged (using recycled materials), and the way it is shipped (in larger containers in order to reduce packaging and fuel consumption).

### **Implementing Green Cleaning Programs in Health Care Facilities**

As mentioned earlier, the use of some conventional products and ingredients is mandated by law for specific areas of health care facilities. But we must be sure to use such products only in the areas where it is legally required to do so. Restricting them to just these areas is environmentally responsible and represents the first step toward Green cleaning in medical facilities.

The next step involves dividing health care facilities into three key zones. The way each zone is used determines whether or not Green cleaning products--specifically Green chemicals--may or may not be utilized there. These three zones are:

- \* Critical care zones: The areas where specific disinfectants are mandated by law.
- \* Semicritical care zones: These include areas such as restrooms, physical therapy rooms, and nonemergency clinics where there may still be a high level of disinfection needed but where facility managers have greater flexibility when selecting products.
- \* Noncritical care zones: These include administrative areas, shopping areas, etc. Only Green cleaning products should be used in these areas.

### **Final Thoughts**

Earlier we mentioned that in the United States, disinfectants cannot be marketed, labeled, or advertised as Green. However, this policy is currently being revisited, and it is likely that the EPA will change those regulations in the future.

Such changes would definitely help to speed the transition from conventional to Green cleaning in medical facilities. Although it has been a slow process, many medical facilities of all types are now looking for ways to Green their sites. The goal of these facilities is to help protect and foster

health, and Green cleaning is one of the best ways to accomplish this.

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