

TEXTILES THAT HEAL

The Future of Health Care Textiles and Their Effect on the Patient Experience

By Gabriel Boardman

As we observe the latest trends in health care, two of those trends are glaringly prevalent: our growing concern over infection and cross-contamination, as well as our renewed interest in the greening of our industry. And these two trends are the fruits of an over-encompassing trend: The greying demographics.

Our planet has never had to handle so many individuals, but even more so, never has there been such a large percentage of individuals 65 years or older. This affects all geographical markets differently, at varying degrees, but most are developing towards a similar result. It is estimated that by 2030, 55 countries may see their elderly population represent a fifth of their total population. For a country like Japan, it is estimated that percentage could climb as high as 40 percent of their total population.

Of course, this hike is partly due to lower birth rates, better health care, and longer life expectancies. Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) will soon all have reached retirement age, and what may be of more concern, when it comes to the trend of greying demographics, is that the next generation in line is generation X; a generation that is more demanding and that will not settle for mediocre compromises. Whether we qualify as baby boomer or gen X, we are the next customers of our

health care system. And next in line are our children. This will *not* be an easy ride!

How can we address the needs and the issues that await? What should we focus on to do our part in providing the best services, the best system, and most importantly, the best care? Acute care and senior living will both be under serious pressure to offer services of greater quality and value, and this will undoubtedly have an impact on our linens, among many other things.

Here we've identified three main areas of development where manufacturers and distributors of health care linens are concentrating their efforts. These were all identified as important factors in addressing the needs of the aging population, and work is being done throughout the industry to strive to address these developing needs. These areas, which are strongly influenced by our greying demographics, are infection control, environmental concerns, and the patient experience.

Infection Control

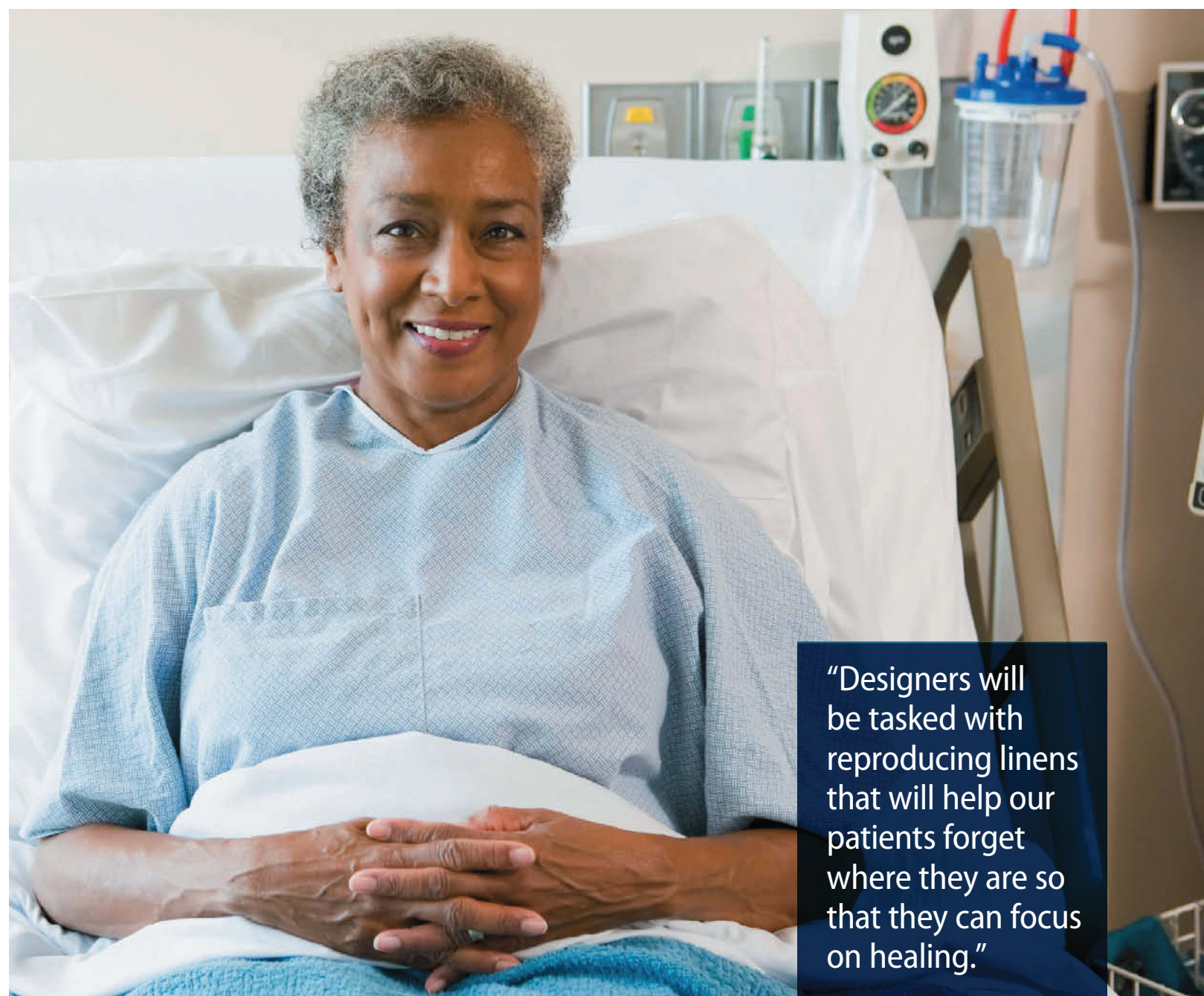
As more and more reports of hospital acquired conditions spread, as these concerns grow, patients will be educating themselves, asking questions, wanting to ensure their provider will protect them as best as they can.

Once such way to address these concerns has been the vast introduction of anti-microbials, which has been on the radar of textile manufacturers for many

years. Many options and variations are offered, and although not suitable for all applications, it is important to keep an eye out on the sector, as changes and progress occur on a regular basis. It is important to understand what each option can deliver and how it meets the expectations of the population that will experience it first-hand.

Infection control gowns are also going through many changes, offering varying degrees of protection. Contrary to popular belief, the gowns are primarily designed to protect the patient, whose immune system may be weakened, and not necessarily the person wearing the gown. For that reason, the level of protection can only be ensured





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if the garment is properly used and worn, paving the way for increased education on best practices within facilities. Some manufacturers are considering, and some already offering, gowns that offer a much more user-friendly closure system for maximized and more efficient protection.

Of all the surfaces in a hospital, a patient will have the greatest degree of contact with his/her own gown and the bed linens he/she lies on. Although health care linens present valid concerns to the transmittal of HAIs, as an industry it is our responsibility to present solutions and base conversations on facts. Facts documenting that although many studies address the presence of microbes on

textiles, there is little documentation of actual transmission.

Also, as many of us are directly related to the laundries that process the linen, it is important to help them be their own strongest advocates. Few reports in literature link laundry to disease transmission when proper procedures are followed. That is a massive statement as currently in the U.S., 10 billion pounds of health care linens are processed each year. To encourage all health care linen manufacturers, this is double what was processed only 30 years ago!

Environmental Concerns

Our general population is an audience that has been sensitized to environmental

concerns. Baby boomers and the like understand the impact of their individual, small decisions having big impacts. This population has experimented with recycling and they make conscious, educated choices daily (electric cars, fair trade coffee beans, pesticide-free vegetables, eco-friendly, naturally dyed, etc.) that allow them to address their own ecological concerns as responsible individuals.

For that reason, health care textile professionals often went off the assumption that because individuals made better, more sustainable choices in their personal lives, the same decisions would transfer into the health care environment. Of course, we would all make the obvious ecological

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choice, wouldn't we? But as much as we want to believe it, that remains debatable. Landfills that overflow with disposables are difficult to argue against. But disposables are not the only products that have significant impacts on the environment. The reusable industry is consistently looking for ways to diminish their footprint. Products dry faster to minimize the use of fuel and electricity; products have superior stain-release properties to eliminate costly rewash (as well as unnecessary use of water); longer-lasting products minimize the number of discarded; products are washed in cold water whilst using less chemicals; cycles reuse water; some facilities are fully eliminating folding and are instead bulk bagging linen...and the list goes on.

As well, and we believe it is one of the most difficult aspects to master, we all strive to provide our customers with options and solutions that are both environmentally conscious and sustainable, whilst fitting into pre-existing budgets. Because no matter how beneficial a product will be to the environment and no matter which generation we identify with, “how much will it cost me today” will likely continue to transcend through years and generations.

The Patient Experience

Two touch points tend to be at the forefront of what we call the patient experience: comfort and care.

In the United States, the broader use and awareness of HCAHPS (Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) questionnaires are bringing further attention to the discussion around the patient experience. Although there may still be debate over the HCAHPS questions themselves, they can still be looked at as a relevant part of an overall process—these questions can serve to inspire the industry.

Health care systems are becoming increasingly customer-centric, even more so in the United States than in most other countries. The patient experience is made of a number of touch points, with hospital

linens, patient gowns, and privacy curtains, amongst others, all playing a part.

Keep in mind that patients or residents do not surrender their identities as they enter our facilities; they are still consumers, individuals, twitterers, facebookers, and unlike our parents and grandparents, their easy access to communication channels with extraordinary reach has become a natural way of life. The good—but most commonly the bad—gets shared quickly. As participants in the health care community, we want to ensure the image that is communicated is positive. We are not only compared to the competition, or to other facilities, but we are also judged by what is expected by individuals who travel, who get to experience the extremely competitive hospitality market, who are aware of the various options in textiles, and who have made a habit of undergoing a strict selection process when it comes to their own purchases (products and experiences) that will impact their lives or the lives of their loved ones.

It is often stated that comfortable, plush, soft, and warm are descriptors that help make patients feel more relaxed, despite being in uncomfortable (institutional) surroundings. These characteristics help recreate familiar surroundings, much like many hotel chains attempt to do. Some of the items that are used in hospital or nursing homes are even labelled as boutique or “hotel-like” linens. These campaigns clearly address the needs of a much more demanding patient/resident population. For that reason, aesthetics, it is believed, will be further incorporated into the conversation tied to comfort. Designers will be tasked with reproducing linens that will help our patients forget where they are so that they can focus on healing.

A potential factor in comfort that may be overlooked is noise. The effect of noise in an environment (everything from megaphones, to chatter, to footsteps, to metal tracks) is significant to recovery and to the overall perception of comfort. Facilities are opting for products that are

quieter—forsaking vinyl mattress protectors and pillows that crinkle, and cubicle curtains that wake up patients in the middle of the night when they are pulled open for a quick check. The less disruptions there are, the better and faster the patient can heal.

Subjectively, comfort is different to each of us. In a hospital environment, however, scientists are beginning to find ways to test for comfort in objective ways by focusing on key factors that affect comfort tied to healing and health. Such factors as microclimate management, contact points on a patient's being, stiffness of linens, heat buildup (or lack thereof), and breathability are being looked at differently than ever before and are being identified as objective criteria of comfort. No matter which generation or individual we are addressing, finding the balance between the individual preferences and the optimal environment for care is the challenge.

Although improving comfort will make a stay a much more pleasant experience, no “comfort” improvement alone must ever be made at the expense of patient care.

Coming Up


As we are all currently involved, at one level or another, in the development of the future of health care linens, let's ensure we are developing the products we will be happy to experience first-hand. Even more so, let's make sure we consider and select the linens we will feel proud of when they will be used by the ones we love. ●



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