



FINDING YOUR ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

Green Cleaning Strategies to Reduce Negative Environmental Impacts

By Stephen Ashkin

There's nothing complicated about the term Green Cleaning. It simply means cleaning to protect health without harming the environment. It can refer to the use of cleaning chemicals, tools, equipment, and other products that have a reduced impact on health and the environment when compared to conventional cleaning products used for the same purposes. It can also refer to methodologies and cleaning systems that incorporate these items. There are many benefits to Green Cleaning, and these benefits have become more apparent in recent years as a result of documentation and scientific evidence. For a variety of reasons, though, it has been more difficult for some sectors to embrace Green Cleaning strategies.

Roadblocks to Adoption

Because of its many benefits, education, commercial offices, and the hotel/hospitality industry have all moved quickly to adopt Green Cleaning strategies. Implementation at healthcare facilities, however, has been much slower.

There are many reasons for healthcare's slow adoption to embrace Green Cleaning. For one, healthcare facilities have far different cleaning needs than virtually any

other type of facility. Consider the difference in these scenarios: while a school may become concerned if several children come down with the flu in a short period of time, a hospital could potentially have to shut down entire wards if there is a significant uptick in the number of healthcare associated infections (HAIs). Because of concerns about jeopardizing patient or staff health, many hospital administrators and infection prevention personnel are hesitant to make any changes to their cleaning practices or the type of cleaning products they select.

Sustainability and Green Cleaning have become intertwined. How a product is made, the ingredients used in its formulation (whether they are from renewable sources), how it is packaged (with recycled and recyclable materials), even how concentrated it is, and the size of the container—all of these "green" characteristics support sustainability.

Roadmap to Greener Healthcare

So how can more healthcare facilities implement Green Cleaning strategies given the concerns and the roadblocks they face? The following is a roadmap for institutions interested in developing a Green Cleaning program. This two-pronged roadmap includes a care-zone

approach to cleaning, followed by selecting the appropriate products.

The first step when it comes to implementing a Green Cleaning program in healthcare facilities starts by dividing a facility into three key zones:

Non-critical care zones: Includes administrative areas, meeting rooms, shopping areas as well as entryways, hallways, and others areas in most buildings. Due to the concerns of many infection prevention professionals, hospitals often begin their Green Cleaning initiative by focusing on those areas with the lowest risk to health. These areas often represent as much as 70–90 percent of the hospitals square footage.

Critical care zones: These areas are occupied by the most vulnerable occupants including some patient rooms, surgical areas, ambulances, and emergency rooms. These critical-care zones require intensive cleaning in terms of time and effort due to the associated risk of harm to patients and other building occupants in these areas, as compared to the semi-critical and non-critical zones.

Semi-critical care zones: Areas such as restrooms, physical therapy rooms, non-emergency clinics, and patient areas where a high level of sanitation is needed, though not necessarily disinfection. The

process of identifying which areas are assigned to this zone is typically completed after assigning the critical care and non-critical care zones. Once those at the extreme have been assigned, often those areas left over are assigned to this zone.

Success in healthcare is often associated with just getting started. Beginning in the non-critical care zone is easiest because it is often the first place to gain support from infection control and other departments because the risk of harm to patients is the lowest. This also allows for products to be tested for performance, identify proper

dilution rates, train environmental service personnel, and address cost-related issues.

Keep in mind that healthcare facilities can reduce environmental impacts associated with the cleaning program without changing its use of chemicals and disinfectants. Often starting by greening general cleaners, carpet and floor care products, sanitary paper, equipment, plastic trash-can liners, and other products. There are numerous ways to impact sustainability in the healthcare setting that don't require a sudden change in service providers, and products and services used.

Selecting Products

While it has been a relatively slow process, more healthcare facilities are finding ways to green their operations. Organizations such as AHE and Practice Greenhealth have helped move this process along immeasurably in healthcare, while other organizations promote similar programs in specific segments such as the U.S. Green Building Council's *LEED Rating System for Existing Buildings (LEED-EBOM)* for office buildings, the Healthy Schools Campaign in schools, and the Green Sports Alliance in sporting stadiums and athletic venues. And each of these organizations provides recommendations on standards that can be used to identify greener cleaning products and equipment.

For example, *LEED-EBOM* provides a comprehensive list of independent third-party standards from Green Seal, EcoLogo, Ecoform, EPA's Design for the Environment Program, and the Carpet & Rug Institute that validate the health and environmental attributes, along with product performance, which makes it easier to buy products with confidence. Plus, hundreds of suppliers of cleaning products use these standards, which means that the products are widely available and competition has made them very cost effective.

The approach of dividing a hospital into care zones and using the most appropriate chemicals, as well as other important components of a comprehensive Green Cleaning program such as high-filtration vacuums, micro-fiber cloths and mops, sanitary paper made from recycled or rapidly renewable fibers, and new technologies including vapor cleaners and devices that turn water into an effective cleaning and sanitizing solution, can all help achieve our goal of creating safer and healthier indoor environments while reducing negative environmental impacts. ●



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