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"TURNING GREEN" IN A GOOD WAY: HEALTH CARE FACILITIES GRAPPLE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

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At a time when climate change discussions and the people presenting these discussions win an Oscar, an Emmy and a Nobel Prize, it is safe to say that environmental issues and climate change in particular, are receiving unprecedented public attention. When the economic downturn is added to the equation, even the thoughts of the least green amongst us turn to how to keep costs down by reducing energy consumption and waste production. Clearly, with a commitment to public health and inordinate cost pressures, health care facilities are also being buffeted by the "green winds of change." Although these trends are not new, what is new is the scope and speed of these changes and the heightened public expectations regarding environmental performance of companies, communities and individuals.

Recognizing the rising expectations, how do managers and key decision-makers in health care settings get a handle on what this means in practical terms? The first thing that must be recognized is that health care settings are unique when it comes to the sources and management of their environmental impacts. In contrast to most industrial facilities where environmental impacts tend to be centralized and associated with a few key processes, emissions sources and waste generation, health care facilities have many hundreds, sometimes thousands of activities occurring throughout the facility on a daily basis that generate waste streams that can vary widely in terms of environmental impacts and volumes. In addition, the rapid changes in technology and medical advances drastically alter the environmental impacts associated with even established health care activities.

For example, with the significant increase in fibre optics and microsurgery techniques, there have been significant declines in the volumes of biohazard wastes associated with invasive surgical techniques, but increases in the use of various chemicals and radioactive materials associated with higher resolution imaging supporting these procedures. Consequently, an understanding of the facilities' current activities is essential to designing a greening program that works, as is engaging all personnel across roles and functions. An initiative focused on one department or activity may yield short term success, but won't have the kind of lasting impact necessary to support the facilities' overall environmental sustainability.

A second critical difference between going green for health care facilities and other sectors is that several key drivers such as preservation of public health, patient safety, privacy and research integrity can limit the ability of health care providers to choose less environmentally intensive approaches over established practices if any of these drivers will be sacrificed. The good news is that a key driver in public health provision, being controlling spiralling costs, is generally served well by green initiatives such as increasing energy efficiency, enhancing energy conservation and reducing wastes.

So health care facilities can't adopt a "one size fits all" approach formulated by industry, but what specific steps can a health care facility take to get started on a greener track? Based on the lessons learned by health care facilities across the United States and Canada, I would suggest the following:

- Use a simple tool (preferably adapted to apply specifically to health care settings) to take a snapshot of the environmental footprint of your facility.
- Engage all departments and as broad a cross-section of roles and functions within the facility as possible--some facilities have found that you can stimulate interest and find enthusiastic supporters by having an initial launch of the going green initiative in advance of formal steps being taken.
- Based on your initial assessment and your discussions with people at all levels and functions across the organization, identify **a few** key initiatives to pursue first. In most facilities there are "low-hanging fruit" (i.e. simple steps that can yield immediate results), and seizing these opportunities right out of the gate can give you momentum to build on as your program progresses and gains traction.
- Look to the experience of others in your sector to benefit from their lessons learned. Don't be afraid to "phone a friend", you'll not only save yourself from missteps that can kill support for your actions, but sometimes the shared lessons help your organization to take stock and focus on the gains made and pitfalls avoided, and this, in itself, can be a transformative way of looking at your program.
- When setting your priorities for action, establish the metrics you'll be using to measure progress towards your goals. This information can be very powerful in tracking your success, cost savings, reductions in environmental footprint, etc., and is essential in establishing the program as a credible green initiative, not just a "greenwash."
- Remember that this is a continuous process that must adapt and change as the facility activities, personnel and regulatory situation change. To be truly effective and lead to sustained change, the process must lead to continuous improvement over time.

For most health care facilities, the key factors determining the lasting success of their green approach include the extent to which personnel at all levels and functions are aware of what's happening on the green front, are consulted about what they think, understand why the green measures proposed are necessary, have information about what this "greening" will mean to them, receive on-going information about the status and progress of the initiatives, and are invited to share in and celebrate the successes along the way. It may not be easy being green, but most health care facilities who have started on this process have found it to be well worth the effort.

About the Author

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