**What we buy matters: greening health care’s supply chain**

By Beth Eckl, Practice Greenhealth

When you walk into any room in a health care facility, what do you see? From a product and materials perspective, you might see furniture, flooring, painted walls, desks, lights, medical devices, medical supplies and more. But what you don’t see are the chemicals of concern in some of these materials or the negative environmental impact they have on communities during production, use, or disposal. Some products might release volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that can trigger asthma in patients or staff. Other products might eventually become significant sources of toxic waste, or pose a risk to the health and safety of infants.

But all of the dangers associated with these products can be prevented, and in doing so, support sustainable health care is strengthened.

The health care sector’s purchasing power is significant—representing about 16 percent of the marketplace. The sheer size of the health care industry’s impact can drive big sustainability improvements when medical products that enter hospital facilities are selectively chosen: reductions in toxic chemicals, reductions in waste, reductions in energy use, greater patient safety and an increase in the demand and supply of environmentally preferable products.

Moving to purchasing products and supplies that are environmentally preferable, a process known as environmentally preferable purchasing (EPP), is the first step in “greening” health care’s supply chain. To address environmental effects of the health care supply chain in a substantive way, Practice Greenhealth created the Greening the Supply Chain® Initiative late last year.

The goals of Greening the Supply Chain® are to:

* Substantially increase the percentage of environmentally preferable products purchased in the health care sector each year.
* Promote the development and use of a system to measure the percentage of environmentally preferable products purchased vs. all purchases.
* Ensure participation by hospitals, GPOs and companies that sell to the sector in the establishment of product requirements, specifications and standardized environmental questions included in RFPs and RFIs.
* Encourage manufacturers and suppliers to reduce the negative environmental and health impacts of their products and services.
* Establish a standard for successfully purchasing environmentally preferable products and services.
* Provide tools for educating staff and others on how to create sustainable health care environments.
* Create safer and healthier environments for patients, staff and communities.

Designed to accelerate demand and availability of environmentally preferable products that are cost competitive and of comparable quality, the Initiative brings together manufacturers and suppliers, group purchasing organizations (GPOs), large health care systems and individual hospitals. By pooling resources, knowledge and action, we are working together to remove the complex and sometimes daunting barriers to accessing EPPs.

Our first task was to develop a set of groundbreaking, standardized questions to be used in the procurement process to identify the basic, environmentally preferable attributes of medical products. Created with and endorsed by the nation’s five major GPOs, these questions were designed to accelerate demand and availability of environmentally preferable products that are cost competitive and of comparable quality.

The 13 Standardized Environmental Questions address issues in the creation and makeup of medical products, including elimination of chemicals of concern, conservation of natural resources and waste reduction. By standardizing these questions, we are informing suppliers about the environmental considerations important to health while also raising awareness in hospitals and health systems about the kinds of environmental attributes in products that will improve patient safety and the environment. We are sending a signal to the market that the combined buying power of five GPOs with an annual purchasing volume of $135 billion needs to be heard.

By using and following the Standardized Medical Questions, suppliers can move much more rapidly towards producing environmentally preferable products, and hospitals can receive products that they know are environmentally preferable based on a number of measures.

The Standardized Questions will be–or have already been—integrated into the procurement and contracting systems of the five GPOs (Amerinet; HealthTrust Purchasing Group; MedAssets, Inc.; Novation LLC; Premier healthcare alliance), and they are available on the Practice Greenhealth website for other GPOs and hospitals to use. The questions to date focus only on medical products (for example, IV bags, mattresses and compression sleeves), and so far exclude pharmaceuticals, anything that plugs in or has a battery, and personal care products.

What we buy matters. Chemicals and toxins in medical products impede our healing mission, and affect patients and the community. Excess packaging and single-use medical implements clog our waste stream and impose unnecessary costs. In the past, few health care organizations questioned the content, packaging or impacts of their products; today, that is changing, due to the companies and hospitals that are joining together to transform the health care supply chain.

Here’s how you can help: medical products suppliers can join the [**EPP Business Leadership Coalition**](http://practicegreenhealth.org/initiatives/greening-supply-chain/epp-business-leadership-coalition) to help guide the discussion and formation of the next phase of the Greening the Supply Chain® Initiative. Hospitals and health systems can sign a [**Pledge Form**](http://practicegreenhealth.org/gsc/pledge), to encourage our GPOs in this unique collaborative effort and to start purchasing applicable products based on environmentally preferable attributes. For more information, visit [www.practicegreenhealth.org/initiatives/greening-supply-chain](http://www.practicegreenhealth.org/initiatives/greening-supply-chain)

*Beth Eckl is the Director of Practice Greenhealth’s Environmental Purchasing Program. She can be reached at beckl@practicegreenhealth.org.*