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

By Beth Eckl, Practice Greenhealth

In any health care facility, there are an incredible amount of products and materials in use. In any given room, you might find furniture, flooring, painted walls, lights, medical devices, medical supplies and more. But what you can’t see are the chemicals of concern in some of these products, or the negative environmental impacts caused during production, use, or disposal. Some of the products used in hospitals can cause health problems in patients and staff alike, while others eventually become significant sources of toxic waste.

The good news is that the potential damage caused by these products can be prevented altogether. By selectively choosing safer alternatives, health care facilities help reduce the use of toxic chemicals and lessen waste and energy consumption, while also enhancing patient safety. The health care sector’s purchasing power is significant, representing about 16 percent of the marketplace. Through Practice Greenhealth’s Greening the Supply Chain® Initiative, we are already playing a key role to drive big sustainability improvements

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 among hospitals, GPOs and companies that sell to the sector in the establishment of product requirements, specifications and standardized environmental questions include 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.

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

Our first job was to develop Standardized Environmental Questions for Medical Products to be used in the procurement process (such as in RFPs) to identify the important environmentally preferable attributes of medical products. Created with and endorsed by the nation’s five major GPOs, these questions were designed to achieve our goals around access to EPPs in the marketplace while simplifying the process for suppliers through the standardization of environmental priorities.

The Standardized Questions address the creation and makeup of medical products, including elimination of chemicals, conservation of natural resources and waste reduction. Standardizing these questions allows us to inform suppliers about the environmental considerations in the products they make. By using and following the Standardized 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.

In the past, few health care organizations questioned the content, packaging or impact 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 the Environmental Purchasing [**Pledge Form**](http://practicegreenhealth.org/gsc/pledge), to encourage the GPOs in this effort to take part. For more information, visit [www.practicegreenhealth.org/initiatives/greening-supply-chain](http://www.practicegreenhealth.org/initiatives/greening-supply-chain)

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