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Reusable Medical Textiles

Not only are reusable textiles less expensive than single-use disposable items – they are reused rather than thrown away after one use – but using reusable textiles dramatically reduces the amount of waste generated, along with associated disposal costs.

In the United States, we have been well trained to use disposable items, from paper wipes to isolation gowns to surgical gowns and drapes. In fact, for the most part, we are a generation that has only known disposable, single-use items in the OR (operating room) and many other areas of the hospital.



But for hospitals that seek ways to reduce waste and costs, increasing the use of reusable textiles and garments is yielding significant results. More specifically, that is by increasing the use of or switching to reusable isolation gowns, surgical packs and surgical gowns and drapes, which can dramatically reduce costs for your organisation, while providing enhanced comfort for end users.

Both the Association for the Healthcare Environment (AHE) and Practice Greenhealth recommend that their members increase the use of reusable textiles in order to minimise waste and its costs. In addition, the

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Nancy Jenkins, Executive Director, American Reusable Textile Association Owner, Jenkins Integrated Marketing Nancy Jenkins is the principal of Jenkins Integrated Marketing and has served as the executive director for ARTA since 2007. She has a long standing relationship with the textile maintenance industry, beginning as managing editor for TRSA in the 1980s, as ARTA editor since 2003, and as a writer for industry trade journals for the past decade. Jenkins also serves as executive director for the International

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textile services industry now has life cycle analyses that prove reusable textiles are the environmentally preferable choice over single-use, disposable items.

The problem of disposable waste

As stated by Practice Greenhealth, a nonprofit association dedicated to help hospitals operate in more sustainable ways:

“The culture of waste in the OR is driven in large part by the increasing volume of disposable medical supplies on the market today. Many hospitals – after jumping on the disposables bandwagon – are beginning to rethink the use of reusable textiles and supplies in the OR.

“Reusable surgical textiles are demonstrating increased clinician satisfaction while also providing comparable barrier protection. And reusable table and mayo stand covers, surgical towels and basins are common sense switches that drive down costs by reducing the volume of waste generated.”

According to a survey of 114 member hospitals, Practice Greenhealth finds that hospital patients in the United States generate about 33.8 pounds of waste each day. As of 2008, there were 951,045 staffed hospital beds in the United States, according to the American Hospital Association. We can therefore conservatively calculate that hospitals in the United States produce nearly six million tons of garbage each year.

In addition, 78% of hospitals designate medical waste as infectious; 53% of medical waste is comprised of single-use disposable items; and the biggest source of medical refuse – the operating room – churns out roughly 20 to 30% of a hospital's waste.

The reusable textile solution

Hospitals that switch from disposable to reusable isolation gowns, surgical packs, surgical gowns and drapes are able to reduce both the volume of waste and the high costs associated with disposal of medical waste.

The following research and case studies prove these points. Indeed, when laundry operations and linen inventory are well managed, reusable medical textiles are not only environmentally preferable over disposable items, reusables can cost less than disposables.

Reusable textiles - a cost-effective, safe and sustainable option

Those of us who have worked in healthcare for more than 30 years may remember the reusable gowns and drapes used before disposables were introduced. Today's reusable healthcare linens, gowns and drapes are dramatically superior to those used in the 60s, however. Indeed,

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reusable gowns and drapes meet or exceed AMMI barrier protection standards required in the healthcare environment for Level 1 to Level 4 gowns. In addition, reusable gowns and drapes often offer a more comfortable alternative to single-use disposable gowns and drapes.

In addition, several life cycle analyses have confirmed that reusable surgical gowns and drapes are environmentally preferable over single-use, disposable products.

The 2009 life cycle assessment study conducted by the University of Minnesota Technical Assistance Program (MnTAP) examined three areas: cost, environmental impact and infection prevention. In summary, the research conducted at the University of Minnesota Medical Center (2,000 beds and 20,000 surgical procedures a year) found that reusable medical textiles – chemo, isolation and surgical gowns – provided:

- Cost savings of \$360,000 per year
- Reduced waste by 254,000 pounds per year
- CO2 emissions three times less than disposables
- Carcinogenic emissions 16 times less than disposable, e.g. Arsenic, Chromium, Lead
- No difference in infection prevention attributes

Earlier studies conducted in 2008 by the Textile Rental Association of Australia 4 and in 2000 by the European Textile Services Association confirmed similar findings.

Reusable isolation gowns

Reusable isolation gowns can reduce waste by 80% and costs as much as 50%.

Reusable isolation or barrier gowns are engineered using microfiber technology that produces 100% polyester, tightly woven and fluid-repellent fabric made of continuous filament threads. Isolation gowns:

- Protect healthcare workers from blood and bodily fluids
- Provide comfort and allow for sterilisation
- Are available in several levels of protection

On the other hand, single-use, disposable isolation gowns generate five times more solid waste than a reusable product. Consider this case study on isolation gowns in Indianapolis:

- United Hospital Services (UHS) in Indianapolis persuaded the 30-plus hospitals it serves to keep reusable isolation gowns instead of switching to disposables. The result? A savings to the hospitals of at least \$1.4 million a year.

How was this possible? The independent laundry cooperative processes nearly 20,000 isolation gowns a day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year.

marketing director and publisher for Atwood Publishing, LLC, a company specialising in convention and association publishing and marketing. She began her career as managing editor and member of the executive staff for TRSA, during which time she participated in annual long range strategic planning, training, convention planning, and attended the Institutes for Organizational Management. As an association executive, she was charged with delivering effective member publications. In doing so, she received more than 20 regional and national awards for design and editorial excellence in her work, including the top award for association writing – the ASAE Gold Circle Award. Born in Quantico, VA, the daughter of a Marine Corps officer, Ms Jenkins adopted a 'can-do' attitude early in life. She enjoys travel and culture, has lived in seven states, as well as in Japan and Nicaragua. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Journalism and a master's degree in integrated marketing communications from the University of

That equates to nearly six million isolation gowns a year.

Kansas.

Because disposable, single-use isolation gowns are 25% to 50% more than the cost to lease a reusable gown, hospitals can realise significant savings through a reusables programme. This does not take into account the annual disposal costs and environmental impact of six million disposable isolation gowns.

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Reusable surgical packs decrease waste and costs

If you are currently using disposable surgical packs and throwing lots of items away, consider asking your laundry for custom packs (sterile or non sterile), or ask them to customise your disposable packs by inserting specific reusable items – a hybrid disposable/reusable pack.



While hybrid surgical packs and increased recycling of items is helpful, even reprocessed disposables must eventually be thrown away.

According to Dr Rafael Andrade, a general thoracic surgeon at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview, the bigger goal is to resume the old practise of relying on permanently reusable equipment.

“We’re just trying to undo a lot of the damage we’ve done,” Dr Andrade said. He recommends streamlining packaged surgical kits.

To that end, in 2009 Dr Andrade and a nurse, Lynn Thelen, started an OR ‘Green Team’. With input from colleagues, they reviewed 38 types of operating room packs, identified which supplies were never used, like plastic basins, catheters, syringes and dressings, and asked their medical product vendor to remove them.

One kit for implanting an intravenous port in chemotherapy patients contained 44 items, but the Green Team downsized it to 27 items and switched disposable gowns and linens for reusable ones.

This effort eliminated a pound of refuse and \$50 in supply costs per procedure. In the first year, the various kit reformulations eliminated almost 8,000 pounds of waste and saved \$104,658.

Increase use of reusable surgical gowns and drapes

The surgical textiles manufactured in the 21st Century bear little resemblance to medical textiles 50 years ago. Today's surgical textiles provide: comfort, flexibility, breathability, safety, fluid barrier performance, strength and durability and low rates of particle release, or linting.

Upfront costs for switching to or increasing your use of reusable gowns and drapes can seem expensive, but case studies show a well managed programme is actually more cost effective than using disposables.

As a bonus, when hospitals switched to reusable gowns and drapes, they saved substantial sums by retrieving lost surgical instruments that would have been thrown away.

Consider these case studies:

1. A study in the Journal of the American Medical Association reports that about 80% of surgical drapes and gowns now used in hospitals are disposable. It estimates that by using reusable linen products and recycling other items as able, hospitals can reduce surgical waste by 73% in weight and 93%* in volume.
2. A study in The American Surgeon compared costs incurred by two similar hospitals – one used disposable gowns and the other reusable gowns. Annual expenditures were \$66,000 and \$25,000 respectively.
3. Winter Haven Hospital in Florida converted to a reusable surgical textile programme in 2001. Within five years, the cost savings were found to total \$625,000.
4. The University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) moved to reusable textiles in the OR more than 15 years ago, and utilises a vendor to provide clean, sterilised surgical textiles. In 2010, UMMC avoided the creation of 138,748 pounds of waste as a result of using reusable textiles in the OR, which correlates to estimated cost savings of nearly \$39,000 in disposal costs and an estimated \$39,000 in returned instruments, which would have been thrown away if the hospital was using disposable gowns and drapes in its OR.

5. Kaiser Permanente's use of reusable surgical gown and basin sets reduced the organisation's regulated medical waste by 30 tons, at a savings of 3.8% in 2010, according to Andrew Knight, Senior Sourcing Director of Kaiser Permanente in San Diego.

Change is hard – start small

It is likely that your staff is happy using disposable products. Some might balk at any change, let alone a switch to more reusable textile items. You can successfully introduce a change to include more reusable textiles through education, however, and by introducing the change gradually.

Start by having a conversation with your laundry provider, who can help with training, service, inventory control and product selection. Ask your laundry provider to help educate staff and implement processes for handling soiled items and preventing textile losses.