



Hospital textiles key to efficiency and infection prevention

by James Lehman, MD, MBA, FACP, FACPE

Healthcare facilities are coming under increased scrutiny for healthcare acquired infections (HAIs) from both the public and regulatory sectors. Several states have passed laws requiring hospitals to publish their infection rates. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has created a list of events that they believe should never happen in a hospital and therefore will not pay for the care related to that event. This list of "Never Events" includes several HAIs and, not surprisingly, other insurers are similarly denying payment for these events. These and other factors have challenged the healthcare industry to develop superior infection prevention programs. Professional healthcare laundry service providers — in-house or commercial — play an important role in infection prevention and patient safety, as well as hospital efficiency.

Laundry professionals serving the healthcare market recognized they faced a similar need to develop ongoing process improvement that ensured government compliance and assured clients' quality and safety concerns. This recognition led to the creation of The Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC) in 2003. HLAC is a non-profit organization whose Board of Directors represents laundry operators, industry trade organizations, consumers and government agencies. Its mission is to develop the highest standards for processing healthcare textiles and provides an independent inspection and accreditation process that recognizes those laundries that meet the standards. No other neutral organization had existed for the purpose of developing this type of program.

HLAC standards include OSHA-required mandates such as practicing universal precaution when handling soiled textiles, PPE training and compliance, needle stick prevention, emergency procedures, CDC and HICPAC recommendations, hand hygiene, Hepatitis B Program, Exposure Control Plan and more. The stan-

dards incorporate a stringent textile processing policy that addresses proper techniques related to washing, drying, finishing, quality control, packaging, storage and delivery of the textiles to the healthcare facility. HLAC standards address facility requirements, such as the separation of clean and soil processing areas, building layout and procedures that eliminate the chance of contamination of clean textiles, ensure consistent facility cleanliness and pest elimination, and proper equipment maintenance practices to ensure no textiles are compromised at any time.

All these factors play a critical role in ensuring textiles are consistently and properly processed and returned to the healthcare facility in a hygienically clean state.

Healthcare trends have a significant impact on the textile maintenance industry. Aging baby boomers are putting more pressure on the market for increased healthcare services. For a second straight year, laundry services remained the number one outsourced department in 2007, according to the 30th annual Outsourcing Survey by *Modern Healthcare*. Combine these trends with the growing need for more targeted infection prevention strategies against antibiotic resistant "super bugs" and the result is a continued and growing need for high quality healthcare laundry processors who can consistently provide hygienically clean textiles.

In addition, competition continues to increase as new healthcare facilities are built, creating a desire and need among those organizations to differentiate themselves. Awards and quality programs such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award or Top 100 Best Hospital lists are being utilized to meet the new challenges of competition, quality improvement and cost reduction. Participation in quality programs can help establish guidelines and criteria by which an organization can evaluate itself, implement process improvements and stay focused

on quality patient care while minimizing medical mistakes and reducing HAIs.

A practical option that can help a healthcare facility stay focused on these critical goals is to partner with suppliers who can provide competent and consistent service for its non-core operational needs. However, outsourcing need not mean that quality and service will be sacrificed. Rather, the healthcare facility should partner with suppliers who can bring expertise and superior standards to the service provided. The two most successful outsourcing relationships are trust and security — without these, the relationship is destined for failure. Laundry facility accreditation is viewed as the standard of excellence in the laundry industry.

An HLAC-accredited laundry demonstrates through the independent inspection process that it meets or exceeds industry standards for healthcare textile processing and possesses the knowledge and competencies required of a trusted, high-quality, supply chain partner. Partnering with an accredited laundry service — in-house or commercial — supports a hospital's need for quality, efficiency, service, cost reduction and, most importantly, successful infection prevention strategies and patient safety. For more information on HLAC and accreditation, www.hlacnet.org. HPN

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