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Satisfying Regulators: Hospital Execs Sold on Accreditation

Program assures healthcare oversight groups that hospital linens are of high quality

By Nancy Jenkins

There's a buzz in the air from plant operators who tout the benefits of laundry accreditation. Is this trend simply a fad or mainstay? Nearly 70 healthcare laundries have signed up for inspection since 2006, when the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC) began inspecting laundries and accrediting plants that met its standards for quality, safety and training. How important is accreditation to hospital executives? Based on recent interviews with hospital executives, laundry accreditation may soon become a standard requirement in open bids for service.

The message is clear: accreditation provides a competitive advantage in the marketplace and verifies to hospital clients that a laundry meets the highest standards in processing, safety and service. Take a closer look at the following comments from hospital clients of accredited TRSA member operators. These hospital executives describe their view of laundry accreditation and how much it matters to them.

Gary Zuckerman

Vice President of Supply Chain
Altoona Regional Health System, Altoona, PA
510 beds
Served by Paris Healthcare Linen Service

If I had to choose between two laundry providers, and all else were equal, I would contract the accredited laundry—beyond a doubt.

Both hospital standards and linen processing have become more complex in recent years. While the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCHAO) inspections used to be scheduled every three to four years, they are now unannounced. There are also a host of other agencies that have standards, including OSHA, the Centers for Disease Control and the Healthcare Infection Control Prevention Advisory Committee. Each has its own standards regarding hospitals.

Knowing that our laundry is HLAC-accredited gives me extra assurance that our linen is being processed with the highest standards in the industry. Our emphasis is on quality and increasing patient safety. Accreditation also demonstrates that the laundry is in a position to minimize any possibility of infection and ensures quality.

When we were going through the process of selecting our laundry provider, I had one board member who did not understand the importance of textiles to the hospital. I quickly provided some education on the matter. Basically, there is nothing more intimate to the patient and employees—nothing that affects a positive or negative experience more—than the smell, look and touch of the sheets, textiles and garments that are provided by the hospital. Laundry is very important.

As Altoona Regional Health System was going through the process of selecting our laundry provider, it was important for me to explain to our board of directors the importance of textiles and clean linen to our patients and our staff. Some board members associated textiles and clean linen with other commodities ("non-preference" services and supplies used by healthcare facilities). This couldn't be further from the truth. So I quickly provided some education on the matter. Basically, there is nothing more intimate to our patients and employees. Nothing that affects a positive or negative experience more than the smell, look and touch of the sheets, textiles and other clothing garments and bedding provided by the hospital. Linen and its processing are very important.

Joe Gibala

Manager, Laundry and Linen Services
BJC HealthCare, St. Louis, MO
11-hospital system
Served by Faultless Healthcare Linen Service

The HLAC can have an important role in giving environmental service managers and materials managers a tool to inspect and evaluate their laundry operations. Most environmental service managers or materials managers are experts in their respective fields, but not necessarily on laundry operations—especially when it comes to how different linen products perform.

The hospital's focus has been, and will always be, on the cost of the service and how to minimize costs without affecting patient care. But several other factors have to be just as important, such as: infection

control, the quality of processed goods, knowledge of textile performance and how that relates to replacement costs, and whether the hospital should go with a COG or rental program.

Whether it's an on-premise laundry or a commercial laundry, the hospital manager is responsible for ensuring that all guidelines and recommendations are followed. After all, the JCHAO and the State Department of Health can and do ask how we monitor our laundry's performance. Having your laundry accredited is one way to help answer that question.

I also recommend specifying in your Request for Proposal that a laundry provider be accredited. An accredited laundry is functionally set up to provide the highest level of customer service and hygienically clean linen. Accreditation is also a great marketing tool that helps operators differentiate themselves from competitors.

Mariann Bartholomew, MS RD

Administrative Director of Support Services
Cardinal Health System, Ball Memorial Hospital
Muncie, IN
350 beds
Linen Svs. by United Hospital Services

In my opinion, the benefit of accreditation is that it adds a level of regulatory approval. I supervise environmental linen, dietetics, distribution, patient transport, radiology biomed and lab liaison. We keep open communications with the State Board of Health and the JCHAO to ensure that we are up-to-date on any changes in standards that affect the hospital. Accreditation means that our linen has the seal of approval, especially as it relates to infection control. I recommend that a hospital specify accreditation when requesting proposals for laundry service.

Brad Struemp

Inventory and Distribution Manager
Truman Medical Center, Kansas City, MO
260 beds and a 300-bed long-term facility
Served by Faultless Healthcare Linen Service

I think that accreditation of laundry services is a good thing. It shows me, to be honest, that our linen and garments are being processed right. We have taken our infection control officer to inspect our laundry supplier's operation, but I also think it's beneficial that there is an outside body accrediting laundries.

I manage our warehouse, central services for our two locations, mailroom, and laundry. There are many standards that hospitals must meet, and it's impossible for me to be an expert in every area. I don't know that much about chemistry, but there are many important factors involving chemistry that relate to the quality and cleanliness of our textiles.

If all things were equal, yes, I would go with an accredited laundry over a nonaccredited laundry. It's valuable to me to have an independent entity evaluating our laundry operations for quality and safety.

Looking forward

Those operators that specialize in healthcare laundry service understand that it requires its own set operation, safety and training standards. To date, 63 healthcare laundries have chosen to confirm the excellence of their standards by seeking accreditation from HLAC (see A Cut Above—Accreditation Advantage, June, pg. 130).

Accredited laundries have found that accreditation increases their credibility with customers and prospects. It provides a significant marketing advantage. As the roster of HLAC-accredited laundries grows and as hospital executives become aware that they have a choice between accredited and non-accredited laundries, the hospital market may come to demand accreditation from laundry providers. TR

Nancy Jenkins is a freelance writer and principal of Jenkins Integrated Marketing, Fairway, KS. She also is a former managing editor of Textile Rental. For more information on HLAC, check their Web site at www.hlacnet.org.

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