

Caring for patients and the environment: How sustainability can cut costs, protect the planet and streamline the supply chain

Environmental sustainability is an important initiative for health systems, especially because the industry is one of the most carbon-intensive service sectors in the world.

There are multiple opportunities for health systems to improve sustainability, since carbon emissions arise from healthcare facilities themselves as well as their supply chains. By working closely with suppliers, hospitals and health systems can lessen their environmental impact, which not only helps the planet but also saves costs, explained Meg McClanahan, senior global portfolio manager of Sustainable Technologies™, a Cardinal Health business.

Here, Ms. McClanahan explains why health systems should prioritize environmental sustainability programs, describes key actions health systems can take to drive sustainability and describes how supply chain sustainability and medical device reprocessing can benefit providers, patients and the planet.

Editor's note: Responses were lightly edited for length and clarity.

Question: Why is environmental sustainability an important issue for health systems? How can recycling and reprocessing medical devices make a difference?

Meg McClanahan: Each year, hospitals in the U.S. generate 5.9 million tons of medical waste.¹ Practice Greenhealth estimates that 29 pounds of waste is generated per staffed bed per day.² With such a large impact on the environment, hospitals and health systems are putting a greater focus on the environment and how they can be more sustainable. Identifying ways to reduce or recycle waste can have a profound effect on patients, hospital communities and the planet.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed supply chain vulnerabilities and the need to adopt a more circular economy for medical devices. To help foster this, hospitals can enact stricter procurement policies to favor sustainable medical devices. Favorability could be given to single-use devices that can be reprocessed to minimize healthcare's effect on the environment. Reprocessing medical devices creates a unique opportunity for hospitals to reduce their environmental footprint. Reprocessing programs can help divert waste from landfills and reduce a hospital's medical device acquisition and disposal costs, at no cost to a facility.

Q: What key actions can health systems take to be more environmentally sustainable?

MM: There are a variety of strategies health systems can implement to become more environmentally sustainable. Establishing leaders within an organization who are focused solely on managing sustainability programs is essential to achieve success. These dedicated leaders can ensure strategies are implemented and followed. Additionally, hospitals can focus on several areas, including energy efficiency, recycling, waste stream management and safer chemical use strategies to help reach sustainability goals. Practice Greenhealth is one of the available resources for health systems looking for information on sustainable solutions across the continuum of care.

Q: How can implementing a sustainability program help streamline health system supply chains?

MM: If healthcare was a country, it would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet.³ This impact, coupled with an increase of medical device demand and product shortages

seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizes the need for a more resilient and sustainable healthcare supply chain.

Healthcare supply chain professionals have a unique opportunity to help reduce the impact on human health and the environment through their purchasing decisions and by working with suppliers who are committed to providing more sustainable products and services. Sustainable procurement of products and services can reduce exposure to hazardous substances, address social issues such as fair trade, and enable health systems to serve as responsible stewards of the community. Environmentally preferable purchasing is a practice hospitals can deploy to procure environmentally preferable products that reduce energy use and waste disposal costs. Additionally, single-use device reprocessing helps the environment and makes the supply chain less dependent on one source of supply.

Q: In addition to the environmental benefits, what are the financial benefits of hospital sustainability programs?

MM: By introducing sustainability programs, hospitals can reduce their environmental footprint while saving costs. Several organizations, including Practice Greenhealth, the American Nursing Association, the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses, have recognized or endorsed reprocessing as a method to reduce waste.⁴

If taking full advantage of a reprocessing program, a 200-bed hospital can save between \$600,000 and \$1 million a year.⁴ Reprocessing also reduces hospital waste disposal fees, as many single-use medical devices can be reprocessed

multiple times, and when they can no longer be reprocessed, they can be recycled through the reprocessor. Single-use device reprocessing represents one of the largest opportunities to become more environmentally sustainable and minimize supply chain disruption while reducing the cost of healthcare.

Q: What advice would you give to health system and hospital leaders looking to start or improve their sustainability programs?

MM: Having a leadership team dedicated to key sustainability initiatives and programs is critical to achieve long-term success. These teams can focus across several areas to drive sustainable actions to minimize a health system's impact on the environment. Consistent education and awareness of these programs and their benefits are also critical for successful adoption and ongoing adherence.

Health systems should utilize reporting and data analytics to track and report trends, as well as the financial impacts of sustainability programs. Continuous evaluation of sustainability programs, partners and outcomes is also recommended to ensure programs are aligned with a hospital's sustainability goals. Sustainability programs that result in minimal day-to-day interruptions may likely be perceived as favorable and more successful at achieving a health system's sustainability goals.

To learn more about how Cardinal Health's Sustainable Technologies™ can help your health system lessen their environmental footprint, [click here](#). ■

Sources:

¹ <https://practicegreenhealth.org/about/news/search-sustainable-products>

² <https://practicegreenhealth.org/topics/waste/waste0#:~:text=Waste%20is%20a%20common%20challenge,waste%20per%20bed%20per%20day>

³ <https://noharm-uscanada.org/ClimateFootprintReport>

⁴ <http://amdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Business-Case-for-Reprocessing-for-web-1.pdf>

