THE OFFICE

Greening Your Practice

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Physicians in private practice have a potentially large role to play in reducing medicine's impact on the environment. The opportunities to reduce your footprint are similar, whether you're running a large hospital or a small- to moderate-sized private practice.

There's no right or wrong way to approach this effort. Multiple points of intervention can make a difference, but the emphasis will vary depending on the practice's location, its size, and the urgency of the issues at hand. All practices, however, can start to make progress simply by looking at the flow of material coming in the front door and going out the back door.

Instituting a recycling program can go a long way toward reducing the volume of waste. So can converting from disposable to washable patient robes, to e-mail in lieu of paper-based communication, and to printing double-sided documents, when a paperless route isn't an option.

Energy efficient light bulbs are other simple way to reduce consumption.

Looking further upstream, consider the impact that your medical and office supply purchasing choices have on the environment. Practices that are able to band together in group purchasing organizations can have an enormous influence. When purchasers express an interest in environmental impacts of their choices, manufacturers listen. Even if you are not in a group purchasing arrangement, try voicing your concerns to manufacturers. Ask them for more clarity and transparency about what's in the products that you buy so that you can make more informed decisions. Ask them to reduce the amount of unnecessary packaging they use in shipping.

Big changes can occur when consumers let their wishes be known. For example, for years, highly toxic flame retardant chemicals were standard in all types of electronics such as computers. Such chemicals present a significant problem when it comes time to dispose of these technologies. In response to consumer pressure, several manufacturers have stepped up to phase out particularly toxic flame retardants.

Another hazardous material that's still common in smaller health care settings is mercury. Not too long ago, the health care sector was responsible for as much as 10% of the mercury levels emitted from waste incinerators. But pressure on suppliers led to increased use of mercury-free products.

Depending on the size of your practice, you also may be able to make considerable strides in energy efficiency. In many areas of the country, energy consumers can negotiate with competing suppliers to lock in a contracted price per kilowatt hour for the year. When energy companies compete with each other in a reverse auction to get your contract, prices drop. Consumers can also specify that a certain percentage of the energy come from renewable sources, such as solar, wind, or hydropower.

Encourage patients to avoid flushing unused prescription drugs down the toilet. Water treatment facilities are unable to eliminate most of these chemicals from the water system and trace amounts of pharmaceuticals have been found in streams and rivers across the country. Some pharmacies and municipalities have started take-back campaigns to safely dispose of unused medications. Another tactic is to avoid prescribing a large amount of a new drug, when a trial week might help determine if it's effective and well tolerated.

Don't know where to start? Try visiting the Web site of Health Care Without Harm at http://www.noharm.org and Practice Greenhealth, www.practicegreenhealth.org. These sites can help providers design a roadmap for what they can do tomorrow and in the months and years to come. ■

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