

Linking Health Care and the Environment: The new Trend

Environmental impacts of healthcare facilities have long been neglected. The first European Congress on Sustainable Products and Practices will be held in Vienna in October.

It is time to link health care with environmental stewardship of the environment: The first European congress on sustainable products and practices in healthcare, "CleanMed Europe" will be held in Vienna from October 6-8, 2004. The meeting is organized by the Viennese Institute for Sustainable Healthcare in partnership with the Vienna Hospital Association and the International Organisation Health Care Without Harm (www.noharm.org). Approximately 500 people are expected to attend. A number of international healthcare and environmental health experts will address the gathering.

Main topics on the agenda are reducing waste and implementing green procurement guidelines. Austria will be used as a specific example – it has a highly developed healthcare system giving rise to numerous environmental impacts. For example, more than 300 hospitals produce 80 to 100 million kilograms of waste per year. About one quarter is packing material and non-reusable products. Water and energy consumption per patient are twice to three times as high as for households.

Environmental protection is health protection. According to experts up to one third of all illnesses can be linked to environmental problems.

But environmental protection also has significant economical impacts. The Austrian hospital in Tulln, the first hospital worldwide with an officially certified environmental management system (EMS), saved more than 400,000 Euros since the EMS was implemented. Ecological and economical benefits are complementary. The bottom line is that avoiding waste means saving money. For the hospitals of the Vienna Hospital Association, a savings potential of 10 million Euros has been calculated. All this without impairing the quality of treatment or care – and in many cases improving it.

Professionals play a key role in developing an ecologically sustainable healthcare system. In particular, employees in the nursing sector are important partners because of their detailed knowledge of how medical systems work and how they can be improved – with respect to both patient safety and environmental sustainability.