

Protecting the environment saves money

Healthcare facilities are finding out that preventing pollution pays off - and is far from impairing the quality of care, quite the reverse is true.

In times of exploding health costs, the genuinely good news is that environmentally-oriented management approaches in health care can save considerable costs apart from generating an entire range of other benefits. As numerous international examples have shown, cutting back on costs in this way certainly does not mean cutting back on the quality of care. Innovative and creative approaches and solutions for saving costs through environmental management will be presented at the first European Congress for Ecologically Sustainable Products and Practices, which will be held from 6 to 8 October 2004 in Vienna. 'CleanMed Europe' is being hosted by the 'Institute for Sustainable Healthcare' (www.inges.org) together with the of Vienna hospital association and the international organisation Health Care Without Harm (www.noharm.org).

The most important cost-cutting measure is to prevent and reduce the amount of waste through careful handling and consumption of products, energy and water. Take bacteriological tests for example: systems already exist that enable tests to be carried out for aerobic and anaerobic bacteria using one and the same test tube. This enables costs to be reduced by 90% and waste by 50%. Further examples of waste prevention in medical laboratories and hospitals will be presented by Harry Oosterbeek at CleanMed Europe.

As findings from several studies have shown, disinfection measures in hospitals frequently go far beyond what is actually required. At the Freiburg University Clinic, for example, disinfection has been reduced considerably. Surgical instruments are in most cases no longer disinfected chemically but thermally. This had led to annual savings of some EUR 32,000 - and 2.7 tonnes less of disinfectant solution in the waste water. Even more lucrative was the decision to centralize the preparation of all cytostatica at the main pharmacy. This led to improvements in workers safety, to a reduction in the amount of waste generated in the consumption of active substances and of one-way items - leading to a EUR 1.2 million saving in just one year. The initiator of such activities is Prof. Franz Daschner, head of the institute for environmental medicine and hospital epidemiology at the University Clinic, who will be exploring the issue: 'Do we need a "green" approach to medicine?' at CleanMed Europe.

Costs incurred by the supply of water and in particular for the - almost twice as expensive - treatment of waste water can eat heavily into a hospital's overall budget. Yet the amount which can be saved without any loss of quality has been demonstrated in a pilot project carried out by the Styrian hospital association (KAGes). Over the past five years renovating the water pipe system, installing water meters and regulators as well as centralised, water-saving equipment have been a major focus. What's more, awareness for the issues at stake has also been raised. 'It's enabled us to reduce our consumption of water by 30% from 1999 to 2003 and save up to EUR 400,000 in water and sewage charges on an annual basis since 1999', says KAGes central environmental coordinator Dr. Birgit Nipitsch.

Careful handling of a consumer item can sometimes be achieved in an astoundingly simple way through the use of simple psychological 'tricks'. In Vienna's Preyer children's hospital, for example, the huge piles of freely usable diapers in the nappy-changing unit were drastically reduced, upon which their consumption was slashed at one stroke.

The actual potential for environmentally beneficial cost-cutting has been calculated by Prof. Bruno Klausbruckner, environmental director at the Vienna hospital association: through the use of environmental management systems, improved waste separation and the optimised use of detergents and cleaning agents, some EUR 8.5 million could be saved each year as well as thousands of tons of unnecessary waste and harmful substances.