

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Managing cleaning chemical costs in a HealthCare environment.

Summary: Sweeping changes in the HealthCare industry are mopping up those institutions unable to control escalating costs. Surviving hospitals, medical centers and nursing facilities must constantly scrutinize their labor and material budgets. The demand to keep HealthCare institutions clean and sanitary at lower cost forces cleaning managers to reduce chemical and material costs and complete more work with fewer workers.

By Pat Bohon

Increasing competition and greater consumer demands in the HealthCare industry are persuading institutions to change their ways or join their struggling colleagues in the financial emergency room.

For the HealthCare cleaning manager, the challenge is to provide a sterile and sanitary environment -- from waiting rooms to operating rooms -- while controlling chemical cleaning costs and getting the work done with fewer staff.

Some of the changes in HealthCare settings are obvious. Sterile-looking, hard-surfaced furniture has been replaced by ergonomic designs that are inviting and attractively upholstered. Curtains and carpet are more widely used to add a softer touch in places where anxiety is, at best, the normal emotional state of its users.

Other changes may not be as apparent, but could be more important for health-conscious people.

Walls and ceilings need better and more frequent cleaning because of contamination exposure. The type and amount of cleaning affects productivity and chemical usage. Using the old bucket and mop or sponge system, even with separate buckets for dipping, wringing and rinsing, can result in cross-contamination.

Today's automated dispensers ensure more control of chemical cleaners because of their measured application. It's also important to match chemicals with proper cleaning systems; otherwise, the chemicals and the cleaning work could be ineffective.

IDEAL SITUATION

A system that applies fresh cleaning solution to surfaces, such as through a pump or hose, could be used. Proper mixing to reach the correct dilution helps eliminate solution waste from splashes and spills. A controlled solution dispenser lets the operator concentrate on cleaning and quality control rather than wonder if the correct amount of chemicals has been added.

When choosing equipment, an efficient and cost-effective cleaning unit should also be lightweight and counterbalanced, preferably with telescoping poles to prevent operator fatigue.

It's often easy to neglect acoustical tile, sometimes known as the "fifth wall." Most HealthCare cleaning managers put off the task because of the tile's prohibitive, two-step liquid cleaning cost.

Some managers "source out" the cleaning, while others let the tiles become noticeably dirty and replace them. Both methods are expensive.

The neglect creates a health concern because airborne particles settle on the tiles and air vents, then re-circulate in the air. Regular vacuuming and cleaning ensures good indoor air quality. Powder and liquid detergents are available for cleaning tiles. Powders are more highly concentrated, mix with water in one step and dissolve faster than liquid detergent. They're also less expensive than liquid detergents, have a longer shelf life and take up less space.

CARPET BURN

With the increasing use of carpet and upholstery in HealthCare settings comes the challenge to find cleaning systems that eliminate contaminants while controlling chemical use and cost. More is not always better when applying fabric cleaners. Pre-spotters and pre-conditioners tend to be overused, resulting in saturation and waste. Fabrics can also be damaged by excess use.

Compare the chemical concentrations because this is a factor in fabric preservation and cost. To evaluate a solution's true cost, compare the coverage per concentrated gallon of chemical rather than the gallon price. Highly concentrated products usually are more efficient cleaners, minimizing the need for frequent cleaning and lowering labor and chemical costs.

Carpet cleaning solutions leave some residue to avoid rapid re-soiling. Don't use cleaners that deposit sticky, gummy or waxy residue because this quickly attracts dirt. Instead, use fast-drying, low-moisture cleaners that result in less frequent cleaning and time and cost savings.

For upholstery cleaning, look for a low-moisture, highly concentrated solution that safely cleans all fabrics and dries quickly, since furniture is continually used. Ideally, the same solution can be used to clean fabric-covered walls and office or room partitions to save money and shelf space.

Using highly concentrated products for cleaning interior surfaces reduces per-gallon mixed costs. These products can be sprayed on the surface or mixed with the cleaning solution when sanitizing and disinfecting.

For the cleaning manager in a HealthCare setting, controlling chemical costs is a major responsibility, since it affects proper training of cleaning workers and selection of equipment to be used.

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