

## The Green Gap

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September 18, 2009

Schools have it; scores of office buildings have it; and even some airports and train stations have it. However, many healthcare centers do not.

The "it" in this case refers to Green cleaning and although not all schools, office buildings, or large public facilities, such as airports, have transferred to Green cleaning, it is actually becoming the norm in many areas of the country. However, one key exception is healthcare. Many hospitals, clinics, and other medical facilities have taken few steps to "go Green," which can be defined as using products that have a reduced impact on the environment.

There are two key reasons for this:

- In many localities, the types of cleaners and disinfectants selected by healthcare facilities are regulated by laws; efficacy issues are the primary concern and not necessarily the products environmental impact.
- Confusion as to what is a Green cleaning product.

These are justifiable concerns, especially because healthcare facility managers are so concerned about the health and safety of their patients and staff. However, the following should help clarify these issues, provide a better understanding of what Green cleaning is all about, and help managers decide if or when they should begin adopting a Green cleaning system.

### Regulatory Issues

As mentioned, hospitals and many other healthcare facilities are required to use specific disinfectants and other sanitizing and sterilization products, especially in certain areas of the facility. Further, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) currently does not allow a disinfectant to be labeled or marketed as Green in the United States, even though such products are recognized as Green in other parts of the world.

Disinfectants can only be labeled EPA-Registered, indicating they have been tested and proven to be effective against a large spectrum of blood-borne/body fluid pathogens. However, just recently, the EPA has agreed to begin a pilot program to reevaluate the agency's position. Depending on the outcome of this reevaluation, the door could soon open for Green disinfectants.

The issues surrounding traditional disinfectants are clear. Although disinfectants are effective at killing pathogens, these products can also be some of the most harmful cleaning chemicals to the environment, especially if used incorrectly. For instance, sodium hypochlorite (bleach) is very effective against blood-borne pathogens, but it can be extremely corrosive, is a known respiratory irritant, can damage many different types of surfaces where used, and, when mixed with other commonly used

cleaning products, can produce a poisonous gas.

While the EPA reconsiders its position, there are steps medical facilities can take to reduce their use of disinfectants, which will also reduce their impact on the environment. First and foremost, only use disinfectants where required by regulation. There is a tendency in some healthcare facilities to “overuse” disinfectants, even in non-treatment areas of the facility, such as public and office areas. Restricting their use to where required by law meets government regulations and helps minimize their impact on the environment.

#### Identifying Green Cleaning Products

It was not that long ago when some manufacturers “self declared” their products as Green. Some made claims based on the best scientific information of the day, while others viewed it as a marketing tool opportunity. When it was later discovered that some Green cleaning products were not environmentally responsible and did little to reduce cleaning’s impact on the environment, widespread confusion resulted and astute facility managers chose not to experiment with such products again.

However, in the past five years, Green certification organizations, such as Green Seal® and EcoLogo™ (Environmental Choice Program) in North America, have developed honored and respected criteria to recognize Green products. Products are tested and evaluated by third party, independent organizations and the results are verified by the appropriate certification body. If the product passes this review, which includes not only verifying the environmental attributes of the product but its performance as well, the manufacturer is allowed to label and market the product “Green certified.”

Further, certification is not open-ended. The certification organization may “audit” the manufacturer to ensure the product is continuously manufactured per certification criteria. Additionally, the criteria may be elevated as new technologies are introduced—what is Green today may not be considered environmentally preferable and worthy of certification a year or more into the future.

#### The Role of the Distributor

Incorporating Green cleaning is not always an easy process and it is very common for issues and challenges to arise. Working with a knowledgeable janitorial distributor has proven beneficial for facility managers incorporating Green cleaning.

Many janitorial distributors are now members of buying groups that have training programs to help them understand Green cleaning and all that it entails. This knowledge is then transferred to the client and allows the distributor to be the customer’s guide through the Green cleaning process. It should also be realized that there really is no “end point” when it comes to Green cleaning. It is an ongoing process and with proper distributor guidance, medical facilities can become safer, healthier, and much more environmentally responsible.