

Medical Practices Going Green

By JENNIFER WEST

Editor's Note: The movement to “go green” – to be environmentally conscious – has been largely ignored by medicine. Some believe that has to do with concerns over keeping infection control procedures uppermost and that operating a “green” practice is somehow at odds with the concept of maintaining sterility. Those who would never think of throwing away a useable object or using the garbage can instead of the recycling bin at home can't see it at the office. However, the movement is gaining momentum. Many practices have transformed their operations to be environmentally pro-active without compromising patient safety and since many Alliance members work in or influence the operation of the family medical practice, we'd like to share a few of their stories.

The need to be environmentally conscious has taken precedence in recent years. From recycling and taking shorter showers to unplugging unused electronics and switching to energy efficient light bulbs, consumers are doing their part to contribute to the health and well-being of the planet.

Many large companies and organizations have also adopted environmentally responsible policies and practices. As the trend develops, medical practices that would like to be part of the movement can start with small, cost-effective steps that can translate into leaps in terms of conserving energy and money and can build the foundation for more efficient practices as time goes on.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), health care organizations spend more than \$8.5 billion on energy each year to meet patient needs. Every dollar a nonprofit health care organization saves on energy has the equivalent impact on the bottom line as increasing revenues by \$20 for hospitals or \$10 for medical offices.

Starting On the Green Path

Going green does not have to be a task of epic proportions. On the larger scale, it certainly can be a huge undertaking, but starting small is the easiest way for any medical practice to begin.

For example, Daniel Wolk, M.D., a family physician in the suburbs of Philadelphia has taken numerous small steps that he already uses in his home, to make his private practice greener.

“We're now doing a lot to make our practice as 'green' as possible”, commented Wold recently on a Web site for green products. The office uses recycled paper products and all light fixtures are fluorescent. And when we renovated and downsized our office two years ago, we moved the waiting room and reception area so we have windows for natural light and ventilation and installed the most energy-efficient lighting available”.

All of the thermostats are non digital, computers and office equipment are Energy Star registered and copies are two-sided. The coffee maker is on a timer, so it heats only when the office is open, and all beverage containers, alcohol bottles, paper and cardboard are recycled.

David Fraser, M.D. of North Carolina commented that he has installed metered water faucets in all bathrooms and patient rooms as well as two solar panels.

According to Fraser, “We also educate our patients about what we are trying to accomplish. There is more we can do and it does take time to slowly integrate green into your practice.”

For physicians who have no idea where to start, there are also organizations that work with physicians to build a green practice. The Teleosis Institute is one such organization that provides educational programs, tools and resources to help health practitioners integrate environmentally sound strategies into their practice.

The Institute recently joined forces with Practice Greenhealth, which is a like-minded membership and networking organization for health care institutions that have made a commitment to sustainable, eco-friendly practices. Dr. Joel Kreisberg, DC, who founded the Teleosis Institute, runs an integrated medicine practice and is now the director of education and service development for Practice Greenhealth (www.practicegreenhealth.org).

“We offer the skills, tools and knowledge to help any size office. Physicians are busy, so we aim to help them figure out exactly what they need to do to become a green practice,” said Kreisberg.

The programs focus on three distinct pillars for physicians: working in a green clinic, being an environmental advocate and practicing medicine sustainably. These focus on actions that may be as simple as sorting your trash, implementing a recycling program or researching your environmental scorecard.

“The benefit of a physician implementing green practices is that it will inevitably save a lot of money over time,” added Kreisberg. “Even if you are not starting from scratch with a green building it is possible to implement green operations that proves to be cost effective and worth the time and effort.”

Taking It to the Next Level

While the smaller steps are the easiest, most efficient and most cost-effective there are other ways to make facilities green, which may include using specific products when renovating or building a new facility and buying natural fixtures and materials for construction and decorating.

The EPA has made a commitment to environmental efficiency for health care facilities with its Energy Star Program (www.energystar.gov) that aims to assist medical practices transition into a more energy efficient existence. The EPA created specific guidelines for building green.

The agency defines green building as “sustainable or high-performance

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building that increases efficiency with which buildings and their sites use and harvest energy, water and materials, while protecting and restoring human health and the environment, throughout the building life-cycle: citing, design, construction, operation, maintenance, renovation and deconstruction.”

According to the agency guidelines, green facilities are designed to reduce the overall impact of the building on the environment on human health and the natural environment by:

- Efficiently using energy, water and other resources
- Protecting occupant health and improving employee productivity
- Reducing waste, pollution and environment degradation

For example, green buildings may incorporate sustainable materials in their construction such as reused, recycled-content, or made from renewable resources; they create healthy indoor environments with minimal pollutants and/or feature landscaping that reduces water usage that may include using native plants that survive without extra watering.

Another helpful guide is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), which is a green building certification system, providing third-party

verification that a building or community was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving energy savings, water efficiency, Carbon Dioxide emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality and stewardship of resources and sensitivity to their impacts.

The LEED guidelines were developed by the U.S. Green Building Council and provide building owners and operators a concise framework for identifying and implementing practical and measurable green building design, construction, operations and maintenance solutions.

A Look at 100 Percent Green

For Dr. Jennifer Ashton, an obstetrics and gynecology physician in New Jersey, the LEED guidelines played a large role in completely revamping her medical practice. When deciding to gut her 1,900 square-foot office space, she knew she wanted to go green, and working with a blank canvas gave her the opportunity to be creative with the space.

“I was starting from scratch so I had the opportunity to do things the way I wanted to do. I felt it was important to me, my staff and my patients,” Ashton said of her practice, “Hygeia Gynecology.”

Almost 100 percent of everything in the office is green and non-toxic. From the paint on the walls to the wool carpet on the floor, its undeniable aesthetic attractiveness takes a back seat to its

high “green” rating. The washable flooring in exam rooms is Marmoleum, which is a linoleum floor that is made with natural ingredients including linseed oil, cork, limestone, tree rosin and natural minerals.

“We most definitely see the cost effectiveness specifically because we are paperless — no folders, storage, cost of paper, etc. that you would use in a regular medical practice,” she added. “We also see it with our patients since we use regular robes — no paper gowns, emailing of results to patients — no copies.”

The bathroom materials are all recycled glass tiles with cork flooring and the medical supplies are stored in recycled Formica cabinetry. Most furniture is constructed from sustainable or creatively re-constructed substances. Window treatments and fabrics are made from organic cotton, jute and linen. The office lighting consists of energy-efficient bulbs and all cleaning is performed with non-toxic and effective anti-bacterial “green” products.

“I believe good health starts with the way we take care of ourselves and our bodies, but it also means taking care of our communities and the environment,” said Ashton. “It is also important because it’s 2009. We need to be responsible for the planet we live on and each take a part in doing something good for the environment.”

Dues News

Alliance dues will increase for the first time in six years in 2011. Membership dues have remained constant since 2004 even though living costs have increased. Food, clothes, utilities, housing, and gasoline prices, have all gone up significantly in the years since the last dues increase.

Effective with the July 2011 – June 2012 dues year, the membership fee will be \$50. This will have an impact on dues statements sent later this year for 2011-2012 membership.

Each state and many county Alliance that is unified in their support of a national Alliance member service center may have differing dates when dues statements are sent.

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