

Raising the Bar in Health Care Laundry Standards and Safety

Accredited commercial services can lay an important role in infection prevention and patient and staff safety.



BY P.J. DEMPSEY

US hospitals, ASCs and other health care facilities generate more than five billion pounds of soiled linen every year, according to a June 2003 report “Guidelines for Environmental Infection Control in Health-Care Facilities” issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A November 2008 article in *American Laundry News* indicates that laundry is one of the most frequently outsourced services for these health care providers.

Commercial laundries that process huge wash loads using large washing, drying and finishing equipment can improve laundry efficiencies for health care providers. On a per piece basis, industry experts estimate that these savings could be one-third to one-half of the energy requirement of a small on-premise laundry and one-fourth to one-third of the water needed. Along with the cost savings that it offers, the bulk processing helps to contribute to a

Picking a Provider

Ask the following questions when choosing a laundry service for your ASC:

1. Is the vendor certified by the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC)?
2. Does the vendor use the latest technology to ensure linens that are hygienically clean as specified by the HLAC Standards, www.hlacnet.org/2100%20HLAC%20Standards%20Checklist.pdf? Is the vendor willing to allow you to inspect his plant and provide documentation that ensures that his facility complies with (and possibly exceeds) all required technological standards?
3. Does the vendor provide electronic counting of soiled linens and online access to account usage, which ensures proper inventory accountability, provides valuable information that helps control replacement linen costs and reduces the overall time spent on the management of linen supplies?
4. Is the vendor aware of the most recent changes to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and International Fire Code (IFC) fire codes with regard to the use of fire retardant containers in facilities such as laundries to help reduce the risk of spontaneous combustion?

more sustainable, cleaner environment.

Health care facility managers, quite rightly, are concerned about how commercial laundries manage quality control, infection control and other safety issues. An increased focus on reducing the rate of health care acquired infections (HAIs) has also generated increased scrutiny and regulation of laundry and linen service providers and put pressure on these suppliers to develop superior infection prevention programs.

separation ensures that potential airborne contaminants do not enter the clean linen processing area. Other policies and procedures specify how clean and dirty linens are transported and that carts and delivery vehicles are decontaminated on a regular basis.

Proper wash formulas in the laundering process are constantly monitored to assure consistent delivery of hygienically clean linens, adequately removing any “bio-burden” - the number of bacteria living on



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So What do ASC managers need to know when they select a company to provide laundry and linen services? First and foremost, they should ensure that the commercial laundry under consideration is accredited by the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC), a nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of inspecting and accrediting laundries processing health care textiles for hospitals, ASCs, nursing homes and other health care facilities.

HLAC Accreditation

Accreditation from HLAC provides assurance that health care textiles are being processed by a company that adheres to the required standards, including those established by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Accreditation is voluntary.

HLAC’s comprehensive set of standards, available at www.hlacnet.org/standards.php, incorporate these and additional stringent requirements for health care linen processing that address proper techniques for washing and extraction, drying, finishing, quality control, packaging, storage and delivery to the health care facility. They ensure that health care textiles processed at an HLAC-accredited laundry plant carry negligible risk to health care workers and patients.

Among the many quality control and infection control procedures mandated for HLAC accreditation is functional separation between clean and soiled linens during every phase of processing. Functional

a surface that has not been sterilized - so that they can be used without fear of being a contamination source. Wash water quality and usage, temperature, pH, oxidation, chemical sanitizers, drying, ironing and equipment performance are all carefully controlled.

HLAC accreditation requirements also incorporate OSHA Standard Precautions that must be included as part of a health care laundry’s daily operations to protect its employees who handle and sort soiled health care linens.

Other Health Care Facility Safety Concerns

Commercial laundry facilities provide a wide array of linens and textiles to health care facilities, including lab coats, scrubs, patient gowns, bed linens, towels, draw sheets and medi pads, to name a few. In the past few years, professional organizations, such as the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN), have revised their recommended practices to strongly support accredited laundry facilities for the laundering of surgical attire.

Laundry and linen service providers also supply fluid-resistant laundry bags, antimicrobial floor mats, microfiber wet mops and handles that improve cleaning performance and help reduce the chance of cross-contamination, as do touch-free soap, sanitizer and towel dispensers that they may supply. Plus, research has shown that microfiber mopping systems reduce heavy, repetitive lifting and problematic body positions by health care housekeeping staff.

Other health care facility safety hazards include slips and falls both on the service floor and in ancillary

areas, such as hospital and nursing home dining and restrooms. Dry and well-maintained anti-fatigue, anti-slip floor mats provided by a commercial linen service can help reduce slips and falls, and message mats that contain safety/cleanliness or quality related reminders can keep these issues top-of-mind for employees.

Laundry Fires Are More Frequent Than You Might Think

One in Six laundries, be they commercial, industrial or institutional, reports a fire each year according to a January 2009 McClure Industries Inc. article, Spontaneous Ignition Fires In Laundries. The numbers account for 3,000-plus laundry fires annually. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) cites dryers as a contributing factor in 70 percent of the fires. Spontaneous ignition is behind 5 percent of the fires with the remaining 25 percent of the fire losses being attributed to faulty electrical arrangements,

machinery failure, careless smoking and arson. There are costs to insuring against this threat, including sprinkler systems, training and the cost of liability insurance itself. These investments are more easily justified when laundry is a company's core business, instead of an in-house service. Health care settings where linens are critical to operations should be sure that their supplier has a back-up laundry plant.

Conclusion

As an ASC, whose first priority of business is the safety of its patients, educate yourself and review all the options before choosing a laundry. Laundry facilities need to meet stringent requirements to offer you safe products.

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