

Recommended Practices in the Care of Healthcare Laundry

Written by: Sandra J. Hensley, RN, BSN, MSEM, CIC and John Scherberger, BS, CHESP, Board Members of the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC)

According to the American Productivity and Quality Center, best practices are: "Those practices that have been shown to produce superior results; the practices selected by a systematic process and judged as exemplary, good, or successfully demonstrated."

Why institute recommended practices in your healthcare laundry plant? You haven't had any complaints. You've passed your regulatory inspections. So why bother?

Healthcare facilities are being pummeled by emerging pathogens, many of them antibiotic resistant. Patients are contracting healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) at alarming rates. The latest report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates 100,000+ deaths and over two million infections result from HAIs. That's more than 1 million deaths and 20 million infections from HAIs in the past decade. These are not just numbers, they are real people who have died or had their lives and livelihoods impacted.

In the effort to save lives, healthcare laundries have an obligation to produce the safest product possible for the patient. After all, healthcare textiles touch the largest organ a patient has, the skin.

Healthcare laundries have a direct impact on the overall outcome of patients. And healthcare facilities require the best performance from all of their laundry partners to achieve the best. Healthcare laundries are an integral part of the multidisciplinary team approach necessary for improved patient outcomes. According to the CDC, U.S. healthcare laundries process more



than 5 billion pounds of soiled linen a year and, providing the clean products are not inadvertently contaminated before use, the clean textiles carry negligible risk to healthcare workers and patients. This is a very enviable position to be in, but one that must not be taken for granted.

So the questions arise: "What are recommended practices in healthcare laundry operations? Where do you find recommended practices for your laundry? How do you determine what recommended practices are right for your operation? How can healthcare laundries affect the impact of HAIs on patients? These questions and hundreds more can plague and frustrate even the best facility director or manager. Where is one to turn for solid, trusted, and proven best practices; practices that will pass the scrutiny of regulatory agencies?"

As many healthcare laundry operations have found, the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC) provides the answers to those questions and others. The HLAC has taken best

Article 3 – Healthcare Laundry

practices to a higher level and established Standards that incorporate the best practices of successful laundries as well as the requirements of governmental and non-governmental regulatory agencies.

During the formation of the HLAC organization and its Standards, it was recognized that no one single source of expert knowledge existed. Therefore, multiple experts in a variety of fields were consulted to present and develop content to formulate the standards that would be used to support and define best practice for processing of health care linens and the laundries providing this process.

Standards were based on existing models, current methods of processing, safety recommendations and input from experts in the laundry processing field, linen manufacturers, and governmental bodies. The CDC, OSHA and HICPAC were consulted, as were end users. Laundry production staffs were queried; published resources and standards defining expectations of the care and handling of linen, including inspection of linen processing plants, and infection control programs from organizations such as the AHE, APIC, AORN, and TJC were appraised and incorporated as applicable.

From these initial Standards came improvements in individual laundry processors and standardization and quality demands from customers in healthcare.

The Standards were revised in January 2012 by the HLAC and, after months of study and deliberation of new and revised information and a public comment period, the revised Standards were published in June 2012. These Standards provide a foundation for laundries to improve their processes and the products delivered to their healthcare customers. These Standards also provide a method to inform

customers that the laundry processing plant subscribes to and has achieved accreditation from HLAC by meeting these Standards.

What areas are addressed in the HLAC's Standards? Everything from the basic elements such as textile control procedures, equipment, personnel, customers, quality assessment, to contingency planning is addressed. The textile processing cycle is covered in detail as well. Have a question about handling, collection and transportation of soiled healthcare textiles? You'll find Standards that provide best practice guidance on sorting, washing and extraction, drying, finishing, storage and delivery of clean healthcare textiles. The HLAC also provides Standards for surgical pack assembly rooms.

These Standards, these best practices that support the HLAC accreditation achievement, promote the laundry processors' commitment to quality practices and processes as well as supplying the safest product available to the ultimate end-user, the vulnerable patient.

To return to the first question posed above, "Why bother instituting recommended practices?" The answer, clear and simple, is that recommended practice often leads to improved safety efforts and quality patient outcomes. Healthcare laundry operations have a moral and ethical obligation to patients and a contractual obligation to clients to produce the safest product they can. By partnering with the HLAC and implementing the HLAC Standards they are well on their way to meeting those obligations.

References

American Productivity and Quality Center (2012). Retrieved May, 2012 from: <http://www.apqc.org/>

Klevens, R., Edwards, J., Richards, C., Horan, T., Gaynes, R., Pollack, D., and Cardo, D. Estimating Health Care-Associated Infections and Deaths in U.S. Hospitals, 2002. Public Health Reports. March-April 2007. Volume 122