

OSHA Confirms That Contaminated Healthcare Linen is Not Red Bag Waste

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It's a complex issue that costs our healthcare system hundreds of millions of dollars each year -- healthcare linen needlessly thrown away as infectious or red bag waste or regulated medical waste (RMW). The culprit is lack of education on Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) regulations for the proper handling of healthcare linen contaminated by blood/bodily fluids. This gap in understanding has caused many healthcare facilities to err on the side of caution and train staff to dispose of contaminated linen as red bag waste.

That's why the Association for Linen Management (ALM) and the American Reusable Textile Association (ARTA) began researching the red bag situation earlier this year and asked OSHA to confirm proper protocols for handling healthcare linen soiled with blood. OSHA has responded with a "Letter of Interpretation (Oct. 29, 2013)." What OSHA Says About Handling Contaminated Healthcare Linen: Existing OSHA Regulations specify that any linen saturated with blood or other potentially infectious materials (OPIM) should be placed in impermeable bags. A facility's laundry personnel then picks up the bagged contaminated linen, washes the linen, and delivers clean linen back for additional use.

The OSHA letter of interpretation affirms the proper protocols for handling contaminated linen and goes further to specify that bags used to collect contaminated linen must be correctly labeled. (To view copy of OSHA letter on this issue, visit: www.ALMnet.org or www.ARTA1.com.)

Specifically, OSHA's letter states: The definition of "regulated waste" does not include contaminated linens that will be laundered and reused. 29 CFR 1910.10330(b). The word "waste" is defined as "garbage" or "trash." Webster's II New College Dictionary, 1995, p.1247 (definition 6). Furthermore, "[c]ontaminated [l]aundry is separately defined in this standard. The definition is "...laundry which has been soiled with blood or other potentially infectious materials [OPIM] or may contain sharps." 29 CFR 1910.1030(b).

With OSHA's recent letter, both associations are developing an industry campaign to create greater awareness of the costly practice of linen being disposed of as Red Bag waste. In addition to sharing the information with healthcare associations and facilities, ALM and ARTA plan to provide education materials for their members to help train and educate healthcare clients on the correct and less costly method for handling contaminated linen.

Members of ALM and ARTA — healthcare laundry operators — estimate that annually as much as 25 percent of their linen exits client locations as red bag waste. A survey last summer of 200 nurses and healthcare professionals at five healthcare systems in the U.S. revealed that 95 percent had recently disposed of at least one linen item as Red Bag waste — even though linen is reusable, not waste. When hospitals allow contaminated linen to be disposed of as red bag waste, they unnecessarily spend resources on waste disposal fees and then incur additional costs to replace linen. In an era of spiraling healthcare costs, this is one area where hospitals can easily and substantially decrease their operating expenses.

Source: Association for Linen Management (ALM)

<http://www.infectioncontroltoday.com/news/2013/12/osha-confirms-that-contaminated-healthcare-linen-is-not-red-bag-waste.aspx>