



## ‘REMEMBER COVID-19!’— PANDEMIC PPE SHORTAGES BOLSTER CASE FOR REUSABLES

Operators see opportunity to encourage hospitals to diversify barrier-gown supplies as the pandemic continues

By Jack Morgan

As the COVID-19 pandemic rolls on with a late-June surge in several southern and western states, an ongoing challenge facing healthcare providers is how to avoid a repeat of the severe shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) that has struck healthcare staff and patients in recent weeks. Laundry operators hope that healthcare providers will learn from this experience the importance of diversifying their supply chains to include more reusable isolation gowns that aren't reliant on a 6-8-week lead time for deliveries from

factories in the Far East. The opportunity is there, say several operators we contacted, but getting hospitals to change their practices is hardly a slam-dunk proposition.

“I'm cautiously optimistic we'll get a good portion of this business back and keep it,” says Liz Remillong, division vice president, Crothall Healthcare, Phoenix, adding that even after the crisis, laundries will have to overcome hospital teams' preference for the convenience, sleek packaging and rebate incentives that disposable marketers have built into their products.

“One of the key reasons we lost the business was convenience and space,” says Remillong, a former chair of TRSA's Healthcare Committee. “Disposable 'iso' gowns come in those nice little packages with the envelope, and you can stack a whole bunch in a drawer.”

What's more, large suppliers routinely offer hospitals bulk discounts and/or rebates on large purchases. This strategy incentivizes healthcare providers to stick with disposables, even when, over the long haul, reusable gowns are offer a more reliable and cost-effective choice. “These gowns are part of the rebate structure on medical supply,” Remillong says. “Companies selling those (single-use) products, their No. 1 goal is to drive spending. The more a hospital spends with one supplier, the higher the incentive dollars back to them.”

Despite these challenges, Remillong thinks the recent shortages may have set the stage for laundries to compete more effectively against disposable goods. “If we can come up with a good system to provide them with consistent proper packaging, pricing and finishing, we'll be able to earn a good percentage of the business back. ... Again, I'm cautiously optimistic.”

### REGULATORY PROS & CONS

It's difficult to assess how much the shortages of PPE during the pandemic could alter hospital executives' attitudes toward these products once the crisis eases. But several operators say it's created a solid opening for a fresh alternative to single-use gowns. When we put this question to Steve Miller, an industry veteran and vice president/general manager of consulting firm Victor Kramer Co., he was emphatic in saying that healthcare professionals won't want to return to the pre-pandemic status quo of a dependency on disposables. “Quite the opposite,” he says. “The mantra will be ‘Remember the COVID-19,’ which will lead to more reliance on reusable products. Beyond the fear of shortages, laundries now will have an opening to educate healthcare executives—particularly millennials/Gen Y (born 1981-'96 or later) on the environmental advantages of reusable gowns. “I also believe that the next generation recognizes that our plants will be better at reducing our reliance on disposable products. “We already see examples of it in our grocery stores, with the elimination of plastics and so forth, which is

**TRSA HAS LOBBIED ACTIVELY FOR A MANDATED 50% SHARE OF REUSABLE HEALTHCARE CONTACT TEXTILES (HCTS), INCLUDING ISOLATION GOWNS AND SCRUBS, TO INCENTIVIZE MANUFACTURERS TO PRODUCE ENOUGH PRODUCTS TO STAVE OFF SHORTAGES IN FUTURE PANDEMIC.**

all better for our planet and, in many cases, like or not, is being mandated.”

Miller adds that he doesn't favor a government mandate requiring a set percentage of reusable PPE in hospitals. He'd prefer to let market forces win over healthcare providers to reusables. Others disagree. They see a move by agencies such as the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as necessary to ensure a reliable supply of these critical commodities. "We do feel that this would greatly improve the problem of shortages," says Keith Luneburg, president, FDR Services, Hempstead, NY.

"The CDC actually *advises* facilities to shift to reusable gowns as part of their strategy for optimizing isolation gowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to supply chain issues, in addition to the economic and environmental factors, using as much reusable PPE as possible would be the best recommendation for all facilities during this crisis, as well as moving forward." Another operator, Roger Harris, president and CEO Metro Linen, McKinney, TX, says a mandate would help hospitals see that reusables are a cost-effective response that can help prevent future shortages. "Once an account includes the cost of reusables in their service, the cost per piece could be

competitive and the increased frequency of service could allow for a quicker turn-around at the plant and therefore make more goods available for a spike in usage," Harris says.

TRSA has lobbied actively for a mandated 50% share of reusable healthcare contact textiles (HCTS), including isolation gowns and scrubs, to incentivize manufacturers to produce enough products to stave off shortages in future pandemics. TRSA Vice President of Government Relations Kevin Schwalb made this case to the office of Vice President Mike Pence during an April 17 meeting with key officials. TRSA President and CEO Joseph Ricci, who joined the meeting with Steve Pinkos, deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security adviser to the vice president, said the linen, uniform and facility services industry can end HCT shortages "The industry will continue providing critical reusable PPE, including the use of hygienically clean reusable healthcare contact textiles to protect frontline medical workers and

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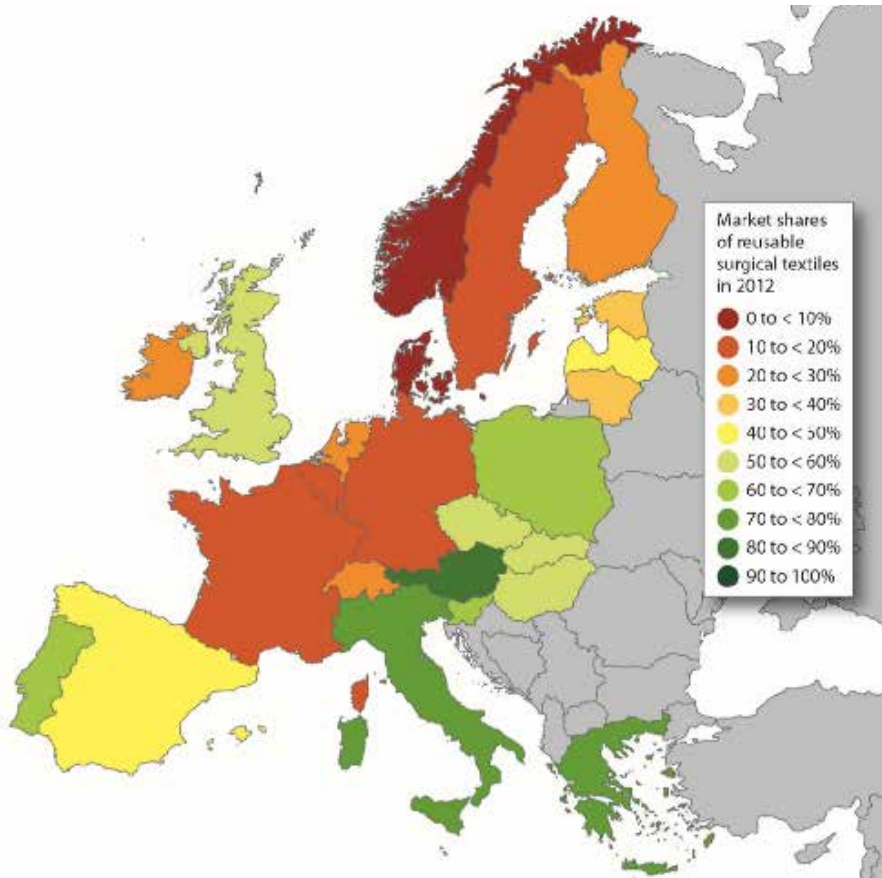
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**ABOVE:** This chart from the European Textile Services Association (ETSA) confirms that several European countries have a better balance of reusable vs. disposable surgical textiles than does the U.S.

patients and has the capacity to make up for the shortfall of disposable HCTs.”

While a government ruling in favor of reusables could help, HandCraft President and CEO Keith Nichols adds that a mandate isn’t necessarily a cure-all for PPE shortages. “Would a different mix level work better? I think it would be a better solution than what we have today, but I’m not sure it would fix the shortage problem if certain behaviors do not change with the manufacturers and the purchasing processes of the hospitals.”

## GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 crisis began late last year in Wuhan, China. It then spread to Europe, especially Spain and Italy. Both countries were hard hit by the virus that forced a shutdown of nearly all businesses. Remillong notes an irony in that one element of the recent PPE shortages in the U.S. stems from the

fact that disposable factories in China were shut down for several weeks earlier this year due to the virus. “Remember, China in January and February, factories weren’t running because everyone had the virus,” she says. With PPE suddenly in short supply, hospitals’ “just in time” delivery practices aimed at saving storage space, were upended by a spike in demand for goods generally available only from the Far East. Some hospitals and laundry operators have airlifted goods—at steep prices—in response to the pandemic, but in many cases it wasn’t enough. “It’s because of how manufacturing works,” she says, noting the high costs and limited capacity of air freight. “Everything you’re ordering is electronic now ... ‘I took this out; I need this back.’ And it’s very efficient when there’s no blips.” Remillong likened the explosive demand for PPEs during COVID-19 to a “volcano” in terms of supply and demand. “The system wasn’t designed for this.”

By most accounts, European healthcare providers have experienced fewer PPE shortages than their U.S. counterparts. We found limited evidence to confirm this claim, but a country-by-country chart (at left) from the European Textile Services Association (ETSA) indicates that several nations, including Italy, are less reliant on disposable PPE than the U.S., which most observers say is heavily dependent on disposables. “We haven’t seen this level of shortages globally, as they typically use a better balance of both reusable and disposable products,” Ricci says of European healthcare providers. “In the U.S., the market is dominated by less-sustainable disposable products, with nearly 90% of HCTs being disposable.” The chart confirms a more diverse mix of reusable and disposable PPE in European countries. A similar balance in supply could, in turn, help U.S. hospitals cope with demand spikes because laundries can turn around soiled reusable goods faster and more cost-effectively than airfreighting in hundreds or thousands of single-use barrier gowns from the Far East.

In a related area, Harris says Europeans generally have stricter rules in terms of requiring employees, including healthcare staff, to wear professionally processed garments while they’re working. This would be a good “best practice” for U.S. healthcare providers and other employers to adopt. “Europe for years has mandated that healthcare (and industry) change into ‘work’ garments and PPE when arriving at work and changing back to ‘street’ clothes upon leaving,” he says. The idea of requiring uniform changes, including scrubs worn by healthcare staff, are likely to receive enhanced scrutiny in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis because of a heightened focus on infection control. “It certainly needs to be evaluated now and likely will be as we move on into the coming days and months.”

For those healthcare providers that do diversify their PPE supply—either because of a mandate or individual choice, laundry operators will need to educate staff on how to manage an inventory that

will likely include a mix of both reusable and disposable PPE. “In places that haven’t been trained on the process, you will have losses,” Remillong says. “We’ve got to go after that part in my opinion. Because there’s a lot of talk about having both. The worst is when a hospital provides reusables and disposables in the same area. Because which one do you throw where? If in the ICU (intensive care unit) you’re going to use reusables and everywhere else you’re going to use disposables, that’s a different story. But if you try and mix product in a specific area or department, a laundry is either going to get a whole bunch of disposables, or a whole bunch of reusables are going in the trash.”

**CRISIS & OPPORTUNITY**

While—at this writing—the ultimate course of the pandemic is uncertain, many hospitals already have had a traumatic experience with shortages of PPE that potentially could place patients and

staff at risk of a dangerous infection: COVID-19. Irrespective of costs—a reusable barrier gown product can provide hospital staff with greater peace of mind because reusables are less dependent on a global supply chain. Lunenburg says the recent crisis should clearly state to hospitals that reusable PPE are “absolutely” a more practical and cost-effective choice. “Disposable gowns are made for one-time usage,” he says. “This creates the need for facilities to be purchasing these products constantly in fear that they will not have enough. Reusable PPE are supplied by healthcare laundries like FDR and replaced as needed. By switching to reusables, FDR bears the cost of acquisition, while facilities are paying for the rental of these items, which cuts their operational costs. Additionally, facilities need to take into consideration the disposal costs, as well as landfill issues surrounding disposable items. The amount of medical waste being disposed of is increasing drastically and disposable PPEs weigh heavily on that budget.”

Nichols says the COVID-19 crisis could make hospital managers more open to engaging in a broader discussion of reusable PPE. “I think this is going to have a lot of people discussing different ways of doing things,” he says. Remillong adds that laundry operators can and should make the case for reusables, noting their multiple advantages, including ready availability, reliability and hygienic cleanliness. Bottom line? The recent PPE shortages could spur conversations that extend discussions beyond a debate over costs. “It’s going to be interesting what happens after this because hospitals are spending so much money,” she says. “Every conversation we’ve had for the last 10 years was about ‘lower your price.’ Another silver lining is we’ll be able to start talking about reusable items, and maybe it won’t be just about what’s the least expensive.” **TS**

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