

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

We write to request that you examine the feasibility and potential benefits of the increased use of reusable health care textiles (HCT) in hospitals and other medical facilities to protect health care workers, address the rising environmental impact of disposables, prepare for future pandemics, and potentially provide cost savings.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed pre-existing problems and weaknesses in the health care system. Early in the pandemic, media reports¹ across the country depicted makeshift alternatives to isolation cover gowns and masks, including nurses wearing trash bags and raincoats over their scrubs and using snorkels as facial coverings. This was due to widespread shortages in disposable products, including personal protective equipment (PPE). In the summer of 2020, the American Nursing Association found that 42% of U.S. nurses were experiencing widespread or intermittent PPE shortages, with 68% reusing PPE that was disposable and intended for single use.² Patients and providers suffer when the demand for personal protective equipment is not met with enough supply.

In the United States, more than 90% of health care PPE and operating room textiles are single use, even though ample supplies of reusable equivalents are available. By comparison, other countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom maintain inventories of 80% reusable health care textiles.³ Studies have found that reusable textiles are every bit as safe—if not safer than—their disposable substitutes.⁴

“One and done” disposable textile substitutes contribute significantly to medical waste, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Between March 2020 and November 2021, approximately 87,000 tons of PPE were shipped worldwide in response to COVID-19.⁵ Most of these goods ended up as waste.⁶ Alternatively, one reusable gown can replace 75 single-use disposable gowns.⁷ Life-cycle assessments show that selecting reusables over disposable substitutes results in significant environmental benefits such as reductions in energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, and solid waste generation.⁸ For example, disposables generate far more solid waste than reusables—705 pounds per 1,000 gowns compared with 83 pounds, a 750% margin.⁹

¹ Justine Coleman, March 26, 2020, “Photo shows NY hospital staff using trash bags as protective gear.” *The Hill*.
<https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/489622-photo-shows-staff-using-trash-bags-as-protective-gear-in-hospital-system/>

² American Nursing Association. 2020. Update on Nurses and PPE: Survey reveals alarming conditions.”
<https://www.nursingworld.org/~4a558d/globalassets/covid19/ana-ppe-survey-one-pager---final.pdf>

³ ‘New Innovations in Reusable OR Textiles’ - Encompass Group LLC - 2020

⁴ Meredith McQuerry, Elizabeth Easter, and Alex Cao, 2021, “Disposable versus reusable medical gowns: A performance comparison.” *American Journal of Infection Control*, <https://www.arta1.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Disposable-Versus-Reusable-Medical-Gown-Study-in-American-Journal-of-Infection-Control-2020.pdf>.

⁵ World Health Organization, February 1, 2022, “Tonnes of COVID-19 health care waste expose urgent need to improve waste management systems.” <https://www.who.int/news/item/01-02-2022-tonnes-of-covid-19-health-care-waste-expose-urgent-need-to-improve-waste-management-systems>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. “Reusable Isolation Gowns Practice Greenhealth” <https://practicegreenhealth.org/tools-and-resources/ronald-reagan-ucla-medical-center-reusable-isolation-gowns>

⁸ Michael Overcash. April 2012. “A Comparison of Reusable and Disposable Perioperative Textiles: Sustainability State-of-the-Art 2012.” *Anesthesia and Analgesia*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223973613_A_Comparison_of_Reusable_and_Disposable_Periooperative_Textiles_Sustainability_State-of-the-Art_2012

⁹ ‘New Innovations in Reusable OR Textiles’ - Encompass Group LLC - 2020

We believe that increasing the use of reusable health care textiles could ensure that the United States is better prepared for future pandemics while reducing environmental impacts of single-use equipment and potential provide cost savings. We request that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health conduct a study of the potential benefits and feasibility of increasing the usage of reusable HCTs and any potential savings that would be gained through the use of reusable HCTs. In addition, we are requesting that HHS examine ways to encourage health care facilities to integrate more reusable health care textiles. We ask the results of this review be shared with the undersigned.

Sincerely,

Greg Landsman
Member of Congress

Mike Carey
Member of Congress