



ABOVE: A laundry employee pulls reusable isolation gowns from a cart for the next stage of processing.

‘CHANGE CAN BE DIFFICULT’— THE CHALLENGE OF CONVERTING HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS TO REUSABLE PPE

Experts reflect on efforts to encourage healthcare providers to shift to reusable personal protective equipment

By Jack Morgan

A recent online workshop held by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NAS) drove home some important points about the economic, safety and environmental benefits associated with the use of reusable personal protective equipment (PPE) in healthcare settings. But short of a regulatory or legislative mandate, laundry operators question whether healthcare officials will move away from disposable PPE.

Liz Remillong, a vice president of Core Linen Services (formerly Crothall Laundry Services), Phoenix, was one of several TRSA members who testified on reusable vs. disposable PPE during the March 4-5 online workshop. The

event aired live following a grassroots lobbying campaign by TRSA members to get members of Congress to ask Health and Human Services Director Xavier Becerra to conduct a review of the issue of disposables vs. reusable PPE. He complied, and TRSA's Vice President of Government Relations Kevin Schwalb praised the workshop as an important starting point for TRSA healthcare providers who process reusable PPE. "This workshop was the first step in possible regulatory activity to increase reusable HCT (healthcare textiles) use, enhancing sustainability and patients' and healthcare professionals' safety, decreasing costs and protecting the PPE supply chain." He added that the event "demonstrated the importance of the industry's involvement in public policy."

Remillong agreed that the event raised the profile of the issue of the multiple advantages of reusable PPE. However, she says more effort is needed to win over healthcare providers because they have relied for years on disposable PPE that many find more convenient and easier to use than reusable goods. Changing that mindset will take time and effort to inform healthcare providers on the issue. "You know, where we've probably been lacking is in the education of our clients, so that they know they're getting a safe, cost-effective hygienically clean product," says Remillong. Reusable PPE can help hospitals and outpatient centers save money on buying and disposing of single-use PPE. The good news is that the hearing and the interest it drew from policy makers has set the stage for an outreach effort on the topic, she adds.

WHY RESIST REUSABLES?

The reasons that healthcare providers—particularly in the U.S., which has a less-centralized system than Canada or European countries—tend to resist moving to reusable PPE are varied. They include practical, financial and in some cases the personal preferences of healthcare professionals ranging from operating room (OR) nurses to hospital aides as well as physicians, says Remillong. Other laundry professionals we contacted largely agreed with this view.

A key impetus for the workshop originated with the impact on healthcare providers of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-'23. When COVID struck, the U.S. demand for PPE in healthcare settings skyrocketed. As COVID patient numbers multiplied, a nurse or doctor might don 60 or more disposable isolation (iso) gowns in a single shift. As more ill people required COVID-related treatments, the demand for disposables quickly outstripped supply. This put healthcare professionals at risk. In some cases, nurses wrapped themselves in garbage bags or other makeshift PPE because the supply chain for disposables had collapsed. These shortages

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of disposables created an opportunity for commercial laundries that provide reusable PPE to fill the gap. In time, however, the development of vaccines helped bring the pandemic under control. PPE demand then moderated. At the same time, suppliers of disposable goods—produced primarily in East Asia—caught up with demand and the shortages abated. Some hospitals found themselves stuck with thousands of back-ordered disposable PPE that they needed to use by a certain date to ensure safety and quality. Consequently, demand for reusable PPE declined.

The question now is whether U.S. healthcare providers will revert to their traditional preference for disposables. Most experts estimate that roughly 90% of healthcare PPE, including gowns, masks and gloves are disposable, even though reusable equivalents are widely available from commercial laundries.

Paul Jewison, general manager of Textile Care Services, Rochester, MN, says most of his healthcare clients have moved back to disposable PPE since the end of the pandemic shortages. “My gut tells me it’s mostly reverted back to the way it was,” says Jewison, who’s also vice president of engineering for the Healthcare Linen Services Group (HLSG), St. Charles IL. “I think we saw a great opportunity to capitalize on (reusables), but as the disposable packs started coming back from all the distributors...it’s probably more convenient for them to just use it and throw it away.”

Broadly speaking, PPE comprise a relatively small piece of the pie in terms of vast quantity of goods that hospitals buy from suppliers. These vendors can offer them the full range of commodities they need. “I think supply-chain management runs hospitals,” Jewison says. Hospitals often can obtain rebates on package deals for goods, ranging from toilet paper to gowns, and they’re looking to control costs. Conversely, laundries typically offer a far more limited number of products. “We’re laundries and we don’t typically bundle

other nonlaundry products competitively,” Jewison says. “We’re not giant supply systems. We just pick up laundry; we wash it and return it.”

Shelley Petrovskis, director of marketing and regulatory affairs for Lac-Mac Ltd., London, Ontario, Canada, a provider of reusable PPE, adds that disposable providers make it difficult for hospitals to gauge the true costs of PPE and related products. “Disposable manufacturers have always done a good job at convoluting prices, making it difficult for customers to identify the true cost of a component such as a gown,” says Petrovskis, who also testified at the March workshop. “Pricing becomes buried in the cost of a pack, and tied to volume and other rebates.”

Beyond cost perceptions, Remillong says hospitals are drawn to the ease of use of disposables, which makes it easier to obscure the costs of “bundled” goods and rebates for large purchases. Reusable gowns are slippery and bulkier, she says. They are finished by hand at the laundry. “You bundle them or throw them in a bag and then you compare that to a nice, neat tight stack of disposable iso gowns,” she says. “For the hospitals, there’s no comparison. And if you look at how they are used in the hospital, carts on wheels that sit outside iso rooms and all they do is open the drawer and they’re beautifully neatly stacked. When they are out of the room, they remove and toss them in the trash. Our focus needs to be on the cost and environmental benefits of a hygienically clean reusable option!”


LOOKING AHEAD

Brendan O’Neill, COO of London Hospital Linen Service Inc., London, Ontario, Canada, says that laundries can take a number of steps to promote reusables as a cost-effective, environmentally friendly alternative to disposables. He suggests developing a case study that would feature a side-by-side cost comparison of reusables vs. disposables. This could demonstrate the

savings potential of a reusable program. Another issue centers on the educational process needed to convert hospitals or clinics to reusable PPE, he says. “Reusable surgical programs require investment in staff (training takes four times as long with a surgical program); infrastructure (dedicated, segregated areas for processing surgical products as per the standards); technology (computerized tracking of all surgical products, sterile and nonsterile); and equipment (special tables, sterilizers, banding equipment, printers, etc.),” he says.

Working with government agencies could help laundry operators and hospitals bridge this gap, O’Neill says. That would be feasible if U.S. regulators mandated a move to reusables, or if state governments such as New York legislate a 50% minimum operating threshold of reusables PPE in all health-care settings. New York lawmakers are currently considering a bill that would require such a move. While making the shift to more reusable PPE poses a challenge for laundry operators, the potential is there for the industry to achieve this goal, which would spur demand for reusable PPE, while helping hospitals protect the environment, save money and safeguard patients and staff—particularly during a pandemic.

Petrovskis concedes that while it won’t be easy, working to convert healthcare providers to reusables is worth the effort. “I like to think that reusables should be adopted by hospitals and outpatient centers based on their merits for outstanding protection, cost savings and the environmental benefits which they provide,” she says. “But I also know that change can be difficult. Legislation mandating set levels of PPE and requiring a percentage of those levels to be reusable, would help us achieve the much-needed positive change.” **TS**

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