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Hospitals go greener to improve bottom line

Composting, recycling can cut their costs

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By CHERIE BLACK
P-I REPORTER

Jim Overton admits he isn't very popular at home when his two daughters want to go somewhere.

From his Bothell home, he rides his bike the few miles to work as a registered nurse at Evergreen Medical Center in Kirkland -- and pretty much everywhere else he needs to go. So, he expects his girls, ages 13 and 10, to do the same or walk.

"I've tried to scale back on that and drive them places more," Overton said.

When he went to Evergreen 12 years ago, Overton was impressed that some of the hospital floors had recycling systems. But other floors didn't, and he discovered it was individuals making the effort.

So Overton began sending e-mails. First to co-workers, then to department heads and other hospital administrators,

suggesting ways to do more. Last spring he formed the "Green Team," three registered nurses who met quarterly to develop environmental programs for the hospital. Now, 10 of his co-workers are members of the voluntary team.

Hospitals have long been seen as one of the top waste-producing industries. In 1998, the American Hospital Association and the Environmental Protection Agency agreed on goals to reduce the effect of health care facilities on the environment. The goals included nearly eliminating mercury-containing waste by 2005 and reducing hospital waste 50 percent by 2010.

Evergreen and other hospitals in the Seattle area are taking steps to not only protect the environment, but cut costs, as well.

Overton's "Green Team" expanded the hospital's battery recycling program and collected 1,200 pounds of batteries during the past year. The hospital also collects used and unused-but-opened medical supplies, such as oxygen and blood tubes considered "contaminated" under U.S. regulations. The supplies are sent to Third World countries where they are sterilized and reused for patients there.

The team put up more recycling signs and bins and got the hospital's recycling container emptied three times a week instead of two. Containers for used needles are sterilized and reused, instead of being thrown away with the needles.

Overton started an internal Web site so staff could learn to become more environmentally friendly.

The team gives a monthly "Green Stewardship Award" to a staff-nominated co-worker who gives extra effort to the hospital's environmental progress. Local restaurants donated gift certificates as prizes.

Other Seattle-area hospitals are improving their bottom line by going greener.

- Virginia Mason Medical Center's cafeteria has no garbage cans, since 100 percent of the cafeteria's waste is recycled, said Steve Grose, administrative director for process improvement. The hospital composts 750 pounds of food a day instead of grinding it in garbage disposals, which had needed 4,000 gallons of water a day. The water savings pays for the bags and composting, he said. In January, Virginia Mason began recycling 70 percent of the plastic used in about 70 surgeries a day.

The hospital hopes to eventually eliminate garbage cans throughout the hospital and recycle everything.

- The University of Washington Medical Center recently started a paper-shredding program with Weyerhaeuser that the hospital estimates will save \$70,000 a year. Surgical instruments are now disinfected with a less hazardous chemical. In 2006, the medical center began buying 100 percent renewable energy from Seattle City Light, which cost the hospital an extra \$40,000 a year, but was worth the added expense, said hospital officials.

In two years, a water reuse system at UW Consolidated Laundry has saved 12 million gallons of water for a cost saving of \$140,000 in water and \$79,000 in natural gas.

- Swedish Medical Center estimates saving more than \$ 1 million since 2001 by recycling, said Michael Smith, the hospital's waste compliance manager. Swedish eliminated blood pressure monitors containing about 180 pounds of mercury -- and recycles all paper, cardboard, metals, batteries, lamps and printer toner cartridges, he said.

Food composting will begin at the end of March. It is working on a better way to dispose of expired medications and chemotherapy waste.

- Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center recycled more than 40 tons of computer monitors in 2006 and composts food, saving about \$8,000 on water a year. Using new technology for cleaning and sterilizing surgical instruments, which uses more high heat and steam, Children's saves 4,100 gallons of water per day and more than \$18,000 per year.

At Evergreen, Overton said even though progress has been slow, and the hospital hasn't kept records to compare its improvement, administration has been responsive to his efforts.

Next week, he will propose a part-time position dedicated to making the hospital greener. He has been voluntarily implementing the current programs in his spare time.

"I call it baby steps -- you come up with an idea and you don't hear back right away," Overton said. "They're business people and that's their first focus when it comes to the hospital. I'm passionate about health care, but I'm also passionate about the environment."

*P-I reporter Cherie Black can be reached at 206-448-8180 or cherieblack@seattlepi.com. Read her *To Your Health* blog at blog.seattlepi.com/toyourhealth.*

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