

Lessons From a Comparative View on Sustainability

FOUR SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE A HOSPITAL'S ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Hospital managers can find significant opportunities to reduce costs and drive employee and patient engagement through an emphasis on sustainability and environmental stewardship. This emphasis does not necessarily require significant capital investment or massive change. Instead, managers who pursue an incremental approach can build on the hospital's reputation as a vital place that gives back to its community.

A German Hospital's Sustainability Model

To illustrate this potential, I'll offer a view into a different, but not totally dissimilar, healthcare system. Some colleagues and I had the opportunity to visit a hospital in Germany this summer. The contrast between this rather typical German facility and its U.S. counterparts was subtle but significant.

Few argue that the United States has the best, most advanced healthcare available on the planet, and our German colleagues noted that research done at U.S. institutions is on the vanguard of modern healthcare. However, the German hospital we visited displayed a high level of modern technology, and the physical plant's age and upkeep was similar to a U.S. facility—underscoring the idea that healthcare delivery is fairly consistent in the developed world. University hospitals in the United States may have more equipment than their German colleagues,

but not necessarily more modern equipment.

What was different was a more committed attitude toward sustainability.

One of the first things apparent to an outsider is the large bicycle rack near the entrance. Parking is available, but a lot of visitors and some staff don't drive to the hospital. Emergency vehicles are smaller and brightly marked with green, yellow and orange stripes. An array of solar panels is on the roof, and no visible medical gas cylinders are standing in the corner of campus. Patients, employees and visitors report that the noise and clutter reduction is calming.

Upon entering the facility, the temperature is not as dramatically different from the outside as it would be in the United States. The facility has climate control, but many outpatient areas have open windows, and there is limited airflow in some spaces. Heat is somewhat managed by shades, shutters or overhangs to block direct sunlight. Central air is not universal, and the buildings use internal atrium-like areas to keep air moving. During the cold of winter, the hospital uses heating radiators, many of which are visible near the windows in waiting and patient rooms. Internal lights are fewer than would be seen in a U.S. community hospital, with sunlight maximized throughout even in the older buildings on campus. The landscape is filled with native foliage, neatly trimmed but not manicured. No lawn sprinklers or irrigation is visible.

We asked our hosts about leadership's initiatives as well as hospital and executive priorities for the current year. They cited a focus on quality improvement, safety and patient experience—in particular, the importance of hand hygiene programs. Our hosts placed a little more emphasis on staffing and work conditions than expected, focusing on managing coverage during holidays and off-hours. There was also a discussion about competition in the marketplace, growth within private hospital chains and budget constraints.

We were struck by the similarity in management priorities between the two countries, but as the discussion continued, we saw distinctions in attitudes toward energy consumption, waste management and building use procedures. Our hosts were

very matter-of-fact about how their cultural norms place a high priority on minimizing waste and energy consumption. They pointed out the frequent trash bins, each with three separate bags for cans and bottles, plastic and paper, and general waste. Ride-sharing, walking, using washable dishes, minimizing waste production and maximizing the use of reprocessing were discussed at length. These actions were not described in the light of cost containment or cost reduction, although they certainly do have those effects.

Cultivating More Committed Conservation Policies

Although following the German sustainability model might not be appropriate for an American hospital in all aspects, some small changes could go a long way to cultivate a similar culture of conservation. Not only will a commitment to a sustainability program reinforce a green footprint and encourage a low-impact approach to healthcare delivery in the U.S. system, but these changes can also save money, improve patient satisfaction and improve competitiveness in today's marketplace.

1 Seek ways to reduce noise.

Noise reduction has recently been shown to improve patient recovery, healing and satisfaction. Hospital managers can use air-flow baffles, white noise generators and sound-barrier walls around construction. Active noise-canceling devices also are increasing in popularity and affordability for use in critical care environments. Daytime and nighttime noise abatement also is emerging as an important driver of HCAHPS performance.

2 Introduce more plants.

Indoor foliage has been shown to improve patient outcomes and satisfaction. Researchers have noted the therapeutic value of indoor plants as cost-effective and non-invasive complements to patient recovery. Introducing plants into patient care and waiting areas can reduce anxiety and stress and convey positive impressions about the hospital.

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3 Obtain environmental business practice and energy efficiency certifications. It can be time-intensive to prove your hospital fits certain sustainable business qualifications, but the cost-benefit ratio of energy efficiency and waste reduction is high. There are government incentives available to pursue a sustainable business model, and positive brand equity is an additional benefit.

4 Discover ways to engage in environmentally preferable purchasing. HealthTrust's Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) program takes environmental factors into consideration for product sourcing and procurement. By considering EPP factors,

HealthTrust provides more products of high quality and functionality that do not contribute to potential health or environmental problems and are made by manufacturers committed to reducing waste throughout a product's life cycle. Many of these HealthTrust suppliers offer products that reduce waste, energy and water consumption; contain safer chemicals; and increase recycling and reusability. HealthTrust's sustainability program—which received its fifth Champion of Change award from Practice Greenhealth earlier this year—can offer ways to reduce the cost of adopting these energy efficiency methods.

It's All Connected

Hospitals contain and transmit the essential aspects of humanity. The

difference between a patient's positive experience and a dehumanizing one is the people who staff and support the enterprise—the diligent healthcare workers who do their jobs every day in service of the organization's mission. Maintaining a strong and value-oriented culture remains an important aspect of hospital leaders' purpose. One way to achieve this is through a focus on sustainability. ●



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