

GOING GREEN IN HEALTHCARE

Report reveals leadership key to implementation of sustainable initiatives

By Krishna Akella

Healthcare is a fundamental societal service. And while delivering compassionate care is the prime mission, doing no harm to the planet is equally important. But as hospitals provide health services 24-7, they consume copious amounts of products and natural resources. Thankfully, with innovative strides in healthcare technology and a growing awareness of environmentally responsible practices, there is ample opportunity to reduce the health sector's ecological footprint.

For the past eight years, the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care has hosted a free national environmental performance benchmarking program for hospitals called the Green Hospital Scorecard (GHS). Participants are evaluated on their environmental performance across multiple categories like leadership, energy, water, waste, pollution prevention and energy behaviour. Recently, 10 newly-revealed trends based on the GHS data were identified.

While more hospitals are gaining awareness of the need for environmentally sustainable health systems, the trends indicate there is still much room for improvement. Leadership, for instance, plays a key role in driving organizations forward; the GHS gauges their commitment to environmental sustainability. Data revealed that, on average, less than 50 per cent of participants had a dedicated budget for staff engagement and outreach programming in areas such as energy conservation, water conservation and waste management. Moreover, only 56 per cent had a dedicated green team on-site. While these engagement values are an improvement over the previous GHS, there is a need for leadership to make a stronger commitment to supporting and promoting environmental sustainability in health service delivery.



Results also point to a pronounced lack of improvement in waste intensity (WI) — a metric that captures a site's waste generation as a function of its area. The average WI was computed to be 0.02 metric tonnes per square metre, which is a notable jump from the previous WI of 0.014 metric tonnes per square metre. Hospitals are generating more waste in relation to their size and it is only expected to increase given the tremendous amount of personal protective equipment waste being generated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospital leadership should invest in initiatives that address this increase in waste creation.

In addition, two equally serious elements are pollution prevention and climate change, both of which are measured in the GHS survey. The former emphasizes the selection of less toxic and more environmentally preferred materials for use within hospitals. While half of survey respondents had a policy for environmentally preferable purchasing, only 20 per cent have actively implemented such a policy. As for climate change, just 23 per cent of GHS participants indicated that climate risks have been identified in specific policies at their site. This circles back to leadership, a role that holds great weight in determining a hospital's approach to green-

ing healthcare and the degree to which they either embrace it or are allowed to embrace it.

One of the first steps that hospitals can take to improve their environmental performance is to commit to scheduled tracking of their relevant data. This will allow for visual feedback on their performance, in addition to better facilitating a comparative data analysis with their peers. Having tangible data on-hand can catalyze leadership's willingness to act, resulting in improvements over subsequent benchmarks. When there is a consistent commitment from leadership, hospitals tend to see better GHS scores and, more importantly, a continual improvement in their environmental performance.

Furthermore, to educate participants on best practices, the annual GHS awards webinar includes presentations from winners on their latest projects and initiatives. This promotes a collaborative environment where participants can learn from each other and improve their overall environmental performance. ■

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