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Healthcare entities find meaningful ways to cultivate planet's health that also boost patient and financial health

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The Buzz This Week

April is Earth Month, when healthcare and other industry leaders join environmental advocates to raise awareness around key environmental issues—such as the impact of carbon emissions on climate change—and discuss approaches to minimize the negative effects individuals, communities, and businesses have on our planet.

Healthcare organizations have recognized Earth Month and Earth Day in a variety of ways for decades—for example, promoting bike-to-work days, launching sustainable food initiatives, and reusing materials in creative ways (like making clothing and accessories out of “blue wrap” from sterilized equipment).

More recently, healthcare leaders have promoted green initiatives well beyond the month of April. Many have incorporated environmental-centric goals into their strategic plans (e.g., Net Zero Emissions by 2050). Architects are also incorporating energy-efficient designs into new medical facilities, such as green roof gardens that produce oxygen and reduce the amount of solar heat reflected back into the atmosphere by absorbing sunlight.

Healthcare entities have good reason to “go green”—they contribute about 8.5% of carbon emissions in the United States, and account for 11% of commercial use of energy. The additional personal protective equipment (PPE) required for COVID-19 and other highly communicable viruses is considered a biohazard and requires incineration to destroy the waste—an incredibly intense use of energy.

Why It Matters

Climate change has a profound impact on the health of the population and the healthcare system. For example, the prevalence of chronic diseases such as asthma increases because of pollution. Mental health is negatively impacted by traumatic weather events driven by climate change, such as loss of shelter, food, and water. Severe weather events can compromise a health system's ability to function at full capacity because of facility damage or healthcare worker absences. They also can lead to supply chain disruptions, which further disrupt patient care services.

Given the size of the healthcare industry, reducing carbon footprints and putting other eco-friendly practices in place could meaningfully impact the health of the planet—and subsequently, the health of its people. And with rapidly rising energy costs, sustainability measures can positively impact financial performance. Mindfulness around supply usage can also save on costs and reduce waste. For example, anesthesiologists at the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics noticed that sterile, single-use supplies were being opened before a patient entered an operating room and were then discarded if a change was made to the schedule. They implemented a new policy that these supplies should not be opened until the patient enters the room and also started recycling sterile wrappers, resulting in an 18% reduction in landfill waste produced by their perioperative services department.

A recent article from The Commonwealth Fund presented a set of actions healthcare entities can take to reduce carbon emissions, increase sustainable practices, and become more environmentally friendly. These include:

- **Understand the emissions footprint.** This includes direct and indirect sources, such as a healthcare entity's operations, as well as purchased sources of energy, heating and cooling, and energy used in producing and transporting supplies.
- **Define emissions targets.** Several agencies and organizations have outlined targets, such as the aforementioned Net-Zero Emissions by 2050 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These targets can include indirect emissions, such as shifting to suppliers that employ sustainable practices.
- **Establish governance mechanisms.** This includes incorporating environmentally friendly initiatives into a healthcare enterprise's strategic plan, as well as accountability at the executive level—for example, by tying a portion of compensation to green goals and targets.
- **Identify, prioritize, and activate decarbonization strategies.** This not only includes major projects, such as building a new energy-efficient facility supported by alternative energy sources, but also operational initiatives across the organization, such as recycling and reusing supplies when appropriate. The leakage of gases from anesthesia services has been identified as a major contributor to greenhouse gases, and some hospitals are implementing procedures to limit that leakage, reducing the negative impact on the environment and also saving millions of dollars.
- **Measure and report progress.** Transparency around green initiatives and communication around progress made against goals and targets can encourage ongoing support for these activities.

In addition to these actions, regulations for environmentally friendly practices in the healthcare industry would help accelerate green initiatives. Healthcare entity boards and executive leaders should champion green activities and recognize employees or departments that have employed successful green practices. Education (e.g., graduate medical education, continuing medical education, and patient education) about green practices and the impact on the environment can raise awareness and provide momentum to support environmentally friendly practices.

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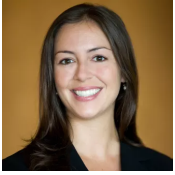
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