

# Institutional Opportunities for Change

## Nurses Taking Action in the Workplace for Healthy Lives

“The concern of nurses is for people’s health – its promotion, its maintenance, its restoration. The healthy lives of people depend ultimately on the health of Planet Earth – its soil, its water, its oceans, its atmosphere, its biological diversity – all of the elements which constitute people’s natural environment. By extension, therefore, nurses need to be concerned with the promotion, maintenance and restoration of health of the natural environment, particularly with the pollution, degradation and destruction of that environment being caused by human activities”

– International Council of Nurses, 1992

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### Environmentally Preferable Purchasing

Considering the large amounts of supplies, materials, and energy used by hospitals, doctor’s offices and other institutions, choosing greener products can help promote good health and reduce our impact on the earth. Here are a few examples:

**Choose less toxic products:** Chemicals that can negatively impact our health are found in a number of common products that we all use, including plastics. Avoiding products containing **mercury, PVC, PBDEs or polycarbonate** can help protect worker and patient health.

**Choose products with fewer allergens:** When available, provide alternatives to allergens like latex or iodine.

**Choose products with less packaging:** Buying materials in bulk helps reduce overall waste that would otherwise end up in landfills or incinerators.

**Choose products with recycled content:** Materials like office paper and supplies, facial and bathroom tissue can be purchased with up to 100% recycled content.

**Choose reusable products:** Buying materials that can be washed and/or sanitized and reused minimizes waste from patient care. Bedpans and mattresses are good examples.

**Choose energy efficient products:** Reducing overall energy consumption goes a long way toward both saving money and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Using compact fluorescent light bulbs and EnergyStar approved appliances and electronics are easy options for reducing energy use.

### Smart Recycling, Reuse and Waste Reduction

Reducing waste by reusing or recycling materials is another way to lower institutional costs and reduce environmental impacts. Implementing the following programs can help reduce waste produced by your facility.

#### Provide recycling facilities:

Containers for paper, plastic, glass, and metal materials can be placed in convenient locations for both patients and staff. Proper labeling and educational materials can help maximize the effectiveness of your collection program.



**Provide battery recycling:** Batteries contain a number of toxic components, including various heavy metals. Several companies provide battery recycling contract services and supply simple, easy to use battery recycling buckets.

**Consider reprocessing single-use items:** Some materials used for patients meant for single-use can be safely reprocessed by outside companies, reducing costs and landfill waste. Companies like Hygia ([www.hygia.net](http://www.hygia.net)) offer reprocessing services for blood pressure cuffs, ECG/EKG leads, and other materials.

## Use biohazard bags appropriately:

Those red biohazard bags sometimes end up as a convenient receptacle for non-hazardous waste. The special handling required by this increased unneeded waste drives up costs and prevents recycling of those materials. Consider undertaking a red bag education campaign, or post signs like the one on above to make sure that bags are only used for appropriate materials.



## Greener Cleaning

Most cleaning products do not list all ingredients, making it difficult to tell which products may be linked to health problems, especially as more products are labeled with undefined terms like “green” or “natural.” Reduce the use of harmful chemicals by choosing safer products.

**Look for the GreenSeal or EcoLogo label:** More and more companies now offer effective products containing fewer toxic chemicals. GreenSeal and EcoLogo labeled products are third-party certified as adhering to specific standards.

**Read the instructions:** Many cleaning products are meant to be used in a well ventilated area. Read instructions thoroughly and use as directed to minimize patient and worker exposure to hazardous chemicals.

**Choose non-toxic:** Conventional cleaning products can contribute to a wide variety of health effects, including asthma and skin problems. Look for cleaners labeled as non-toxic and choose products that are appropriate for the job at hand.

## Additional resources:

### **Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments**

*A community of nurses committed to healthy people and healthy environments.*

[www.e-commons.org](http://www.e-commons.org)

### **American Nurses Association**

*Information center for national nursing organization.*

[www.nursingworld.org](http://www.nursingworld.org)

### **Campaign for Safe Cosmetics**

*A nonprofit coalition effort dedicated to getting chemicals linked to cancer, birth defects and other health problems out of our personal care products.*

[www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org)

### **Health Care Without Harm**

*Leading the global movement for environmentally responsible health care.*

[www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)

### **The Luminary Project**

*An effort to capture the illuminating stories of nurses' activities to improve human health by improving the health of the environment.*

[www.theluminaryproject.org](http://www.theluminaryproject.org)

### **Practice GreenHealth**

*Membership and networking organization for institutions in the healthcare community that have made a commitment to sustainable, eco-friendly practices.*

[www.practicegreenhealth.org](http://www.practicegreenhealth.org)

### **Sustainable Hospitals**

*Provides technical support to the health care industry for selecting products and work practices that reduce occupational and environmental hazards, maintain quality patient care, and control costs.*

[www.sustainablehospitals.org](http://www.sustainablehospitals.org)

