Recycling saves Keesler hospital $62,000

11/23/2011 - KEESLER AIR FORCE BASE, Miss. (AFNS) -- The Keesler Hospital's operating room is once again "going green."

In 2004, Capt. Wendy Wilkins, an 81st Surgical Operations Squadron operating room nurse, began reprocessing the Flowtron compression hoses used in the operating rooms. Unfortunately, the reprocessing program wasn't re-established during the hospital's rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina.When CaptainWilkins returned to Keesler last November, she revitalized the program.

In May, the captain met with a representative of Stryker/Ascent Sustainability, the hose reprocessor, to research other supply recycling options and then presented the information to 81st Medical Group surgeons.

"We had to get their buy in since they would be the product users otherwise all our efforts would be a waste of time," she said. "They agreed to use the refurbished items, but made it clear that if they had any problems, we would go back to purchasing new supplies.

Joan Sullivan passes Capt. Wendy Wilkins a remanufactured harmonic scalpel used for laparoscopic procedures Oct. 18, 2011, at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss.

"Terms such as 'single-use items' and 'expired/unopened supplies' seem to make reprocessing difficult to understand," the captain said.

"People think, 'I don't want something dirty used on me.'" Wilkins pointed out that "single-use" is a manufacturer's term, not one used by the Food and Drug Administration.

Once the FDA grants the ability to reprocess an item, that product can be stripped down, reassembled, cleaned and functionally checked for repackaging, sterilization and redistribution.

"Most disposable items used in surgical procedures today are so well made they can withstand multiple uses," she said. "When Stryker reprocesses items, the hospital repurchases them at a 60 percent discount off the manufacturer's price. Items without reprocessing clearance are sent out to Stryker to reclaim the scrap plastic and metal instead of being disposed of as hospital waste.With the evolution of technology and stricter regulations in this market, it just made sense to recycle."

The 81st MDG is charged 30 cents per pound for biohazardous waste. Since May, the amount of biohazardous waste was reduced by 1,731 pounds, saving $519. This

was returned to the hospital's operational funds and used to cover shortfalls.

"With the Department of Defense's budget shrinking and the rising cost of health care, we are going green without jeopardizing the standard of care or safety of our patients," Wilkins said.

Expired and unopened supplies are another area in which the hospital realized tremendous savings.

"Due to the quantity of supplies that must be purchased, some may expire before they can be used," the captain said. "This is true in all hospitals. This seems wasteful, especially when purchasing more of the same item to replace what we just tossed out. Since they're still in their original packaging, they can be sent to a Stryker facility in Phoenix that resterilizes expired and unopened supplies.

"We then repurchase them at a 60 percent savings as well," Wilkins said. "As a result, between June and September, the Keesler Air Force Base Hospital saved $62,000 through reprocessed supplies."

Wilkins said the staff hasn't returned a single item due to malfunction or other problems.

Keesler AFB's military medical treatment facility is one of 19 in 11 states currently participating in the reprocessing program. This year alone, DOD has seen $2,169,926 in device savings and kept 33 tons of medical waste from landfills.

"We're one of the first Air Force facilities to take advantage of reprocessing supplies and the first Air Force medical treatment facility to initiate the recoupment of expired and unopened disposables," Wilkins said. "We're just scratching the surface. Our OR team has passed the word to other areas, such as the gastroenterology clinic, catheterization/electrophysiology lab and infection control.

"With the help of Muriel Gatlin, our chief of infection control, the clinics are also coming on board," she said. "Staff members are collecting expired supplies and redistributing them for training purposes."

(Courtesy of the 81st Medical Group Public Affairs Office)

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