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How to make your practice more "green"

By Brandon Glenn

Colorado pediatrician Pakhi Chaudhuri, MD, enjoys being an eco-friendly role model for patients and other practices.

Pakhi Chaudhuri, MD, has emphasized environmental friendliness ever since she opened her Durango, Colorado, pediatrics practice three years ago.

She buys "green" cleaning products and green office furniture. Her office's exam tables and rolling stools are free of PVC, a plastic that can release toxic chemicals into the air.

Physicians swear an oath to "do no harm," but many, like Chaudhuri, are growing increasingly concerned with the harm their industry inflicts on the environment and their patients. "As physicians, there's only so much we can do," she says, but she knows that her practice can set a good example for her patients and perhaps for other practices too. For Chaudhuri, that's reason enough to justify her efforts.

To address ever-growing environmental concerns, more physicians are taking steps to create greener practices. Some do it simply because it feels like the right thing to do, some do it to cut costs and boost efficiency, while others report that going green has improved public relations and positioned them as role models in their communities. Whatever the motivation, doctors who advocate going green say it can be good for business, and it can result in healthier and happier patients and staff.

And every little bit counts, environmental advocates say—even initiatives as rudimentary as encouraging employees to carpool or adding recycling bins to the kitchen and break areas.

"People might look at that and say, 'My God, what minutiae!' But it's really about how much thinking about sustainability penetrates your culture," says Charles Kilo, MD, an internist who founded the Portland, Oregon-based medical clinic Greenfield Health in 2001.

For Kilo, being green fits into his goal of running an innovative practice. Greenfield tries to be "a completely different doctor's office," he says, in part by offering e-mail and phone consultations, same-day appointments, online access to medical records, and home visits.

"We believe that we need to explore how to reduce our overall environmental impact and improve sustainability, right along with focusing on how we improve care and how we innovate in the improvement of care," he says.

Kilo is not the only one to connect environmental friendliness to superior patient care. At its annual policy meeting in November, the American Medical Association voted to pass a resolution supporting "responsible" waste management practices, the use of ecologically sustainable products, and building practices that "contribute to a healthy environment." In recent years, the AMA has adopted policies that encourage recycling in the medical community and called for physicians to be spokespeople for environmental stewardship.

Before most doctors can become green advocates, though, they'll need to make some changes to their own practices. The good news? Most green techniques, at least those that don't involve investing in an electronic health records system, don't require huge investments of time and money—just a bit of effort and commitment from you and your staff. Following is a guide to greening your practice, starting with simple, low-cost steps and building up to more complex, costly options.

START SIMPLE

The easiest way to go green is to focus on the "low-hanging fruit"—the decisions you make about what products to purchase, for instance, says Cecilia Deloach of Practice Greenhealth, an Arlington, Virginia nonprofit that helps health-care organizations become more eco-friendly.

First, consider the cleaning products your practice buys, such as detergents and glass, floor, and bathroom cleaners. Many cleaners emit volatile organic compounds, toxic chemicals that can harm air quality and pose a risk to patients with respiratory conditions, Deloach says. Poor indoor air quality causes ailments such as nausea and eye, nose, and throat irritation, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which uses the term "sick building syndrome" to describe symptoms experienced as a result of a building's air quality.

A web search for "green cleaning products" reveals a number of websites that sell environmentally friendly products, as well as sites that offer instructions on how to mix your own green cleaners. Check with your current suppliers to see whether they offer environmentally friendly cleaners.

Subscribing to the theory that anything kept out of a landfill benefits the environment, Chaudhuri has stocked her office with previously owned items, including chairs, file cabinets, phones, computer monitors, and scales. Buying used has saved her practice thousands of dollars, she estimates.

In addition, she uses tissues and paper towels—even business cards—made from recycled paper. She buys reusable medical instruments whenever possible, noting that her practice uses reusable scalpel handles and suture removal kits.

"There's a lot of disposable stuff entering the system, and we're trying to not use so much of it," Chaudhuri says.

You can likely reap significant benefits in energy efficiency merely by incorporating common household measures at your practice. Turn out the lights in unoccupied exam rooms, go easy on the air conditioning, and use high-efficiency lightbulbs whenever possible.

Mike Romeo, MD, co-founder of a four-physician practice in Turlock, California, encourages his staffers to carpool or bike to work. His practice has installed motion detectors on many of the office's lights, as well as a programmable thermostat that allows for heating and cooling savings during off-hours. Staffers open window shades whenever possible to take advantage of natural light and heat. Besides savings on lighting and heating costs, infusing an office with natural light often boosts staff morale.

To Romeo, environmentalism is akin to preventive medicine. Doctors don't wait until patients get sick to treat them, and they shouldn't wait until the Earth's resources are tapped out before thinking about how to protect them.

"Our goal is to see as few patients as possible and still pay our bills," Romeo says. "By cutting our overhead, we're able to spend more time with patients because we need less income."

A DEEPER SHADE OF GREEN

Many doctors who have employed technology to boost efficiency and improve patient care report that they are also saving thousands in supply costs while chipping in for the environment. The downside: New technology doesn't come cheap.

Richard Schoor, MD, of Smithtown, New York, estimates that his EHR saves him about \$6,000 a year on costs associated with paper, folders, and medical charts. And that's in addition to what he saves by staying in his current office space, which he couldn't do without the system. If not for the storage space his EHR allows him to conserve, "I could never be in this office," he says.

But when it comes to EHRs, you'll have to pay before you can save. Schoor says he's in the midst of buying a new EHR that will cost \$600 per month over 36 months. He estimates that he'll break even on his new system costs after factoring in decreased payroll expenses and efficiency gains.

Romeo also reports big savings. He slashed an estimated \$24,000 per year in paper and storage costs courtesy of his EHR. But his system also carries a high price tag. His practice, which employs four full-time and two part-time physicians, teamed up with another practice in the building to pay \$20,000 in up-front EHR costs. His practice also pays about \$40,000 per year in software updates and support costs, he says.

But you don't have to drop tens of thousands of dollars on the latest EHR to enjoy the greening effects of technology. Kilo saves patient and staff time and cuts patients' fuel costs by performing consultations via e-mail and phone. Patients love the convenience, and providing remote consultations makes Kilo happy that he's keeping cars off the roads.

"Every time you keep somebody from having to drive to your practice, that's a good thing," he says.

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START A "GREEN TEAM"

Health-care environmental advocacy groups recommend establishing a "green team"—a group of employees that leads green initiatives and educates others.

The Teleosis Institute, a San Francisco nonprofit, says the team should include employees from all levels of the organization and should work to establish what it calls "SMART" goals—i.e., those that are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-bound.

Elizabeth Hays, MD, an internist with Greenfield Health in Portland, Oregon, leads a four-person green team, which she says was started by

employees who share an interest in sustainability and wanted to help the practice become more environmentally friendly.

"Our responsibilities are to gather and generate ideas about how to improve the environmental sustainability of our medical practice, to disseminate information to our team about more environmentally responsible behaviors, and to sponsor events that raise awareness of these issues," she says.

So far, the team has phased out disposable water and coffee cups and replaced them with compostable versions, increased the recycled content of the paper the practice buys, and sponsored a "Better Way to Get to Work" day, in which it encouraged employees to carpool or take public transit, rather than drive to work. —**BG**

EXTREME GREEN

Because most doctors lease their office space, they rarely have a say in how it is built or what materials are used. But physicians like Lawrence Rosen, MD, who find themselves fortunate enough to move into new or rehabbed space, sometimes get to add their own green imprint to their offices.

Rosen's property owner, who keeps an office in the same building, allowed the pediatrician to select non-toxic paints, carpet, ceiling and floor tiles, and cabinets in his 4,000-square-foot, Oradell, New Jersey office after it had been completely gutted.

In choosing building materials, Rosen collaborated with the Green Depot, a New York-area retailer that bills itself as the top source for green building supplies. The company advised Rosen on his options for environmentally friendly paints.

His office's floor-to-ceiling windows in many rooms eliminate the need to turn on lights on most summer days. While Rosen estimates that building with green materials cost about 3 to 5 percent more than typical construction, he believes he'll make up that expense within a year from the energy savings he'll realize.

The practice's environmental friendliness goes beyond greening the building, Rosen says. Among other things, he encourages patients to bring in unused medicine so he can dispose of it safely, figuring much of it would otherwise end up flushed down toilets and seeping into the local water supply.

Rosen's emphasis on greening stems from his desire to "walk the walk" when it comes to healthy living. If you're preaching about the virtues of living a healthy lifestyle, you'd better model that behavior for patients, he says. "If patients walk into your office and it's a toxic environment, what sort of message does that send about health?"

Instead, he has become a role model for his community, and it's helped with marketing too.

"Almost universally, the response has been: 'I came here for what you're doing,'" Rosen says. "I believe in your mission. I believe in your model."
—**BG**



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