

## Healthcare Laundry: Search for Continual Improvement (Part 1)

MATT POE | July 20, 2017



Infection control and linen security are among the healthcare laundry industry's top challenges. (Image licensed by Ingram Publishing)

### Experts explore infection control, linen security

CHICAGO — Healthcare laundries face a multitude of issues that impact both patient health and their own business.

Case in point, the recent wrongful death lawsuits against Paris Cos. and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). Several families of patients with serious diseases or undergoing transplants sued both the laundry and the hospital because the patients died after apparently contracting mold-related infections from tainted bed linens.

The lawsuits are ongoing, but the issues facing Paris Cos. are ones every healthcare laundry must face and address: infection control and linen security. Other challenges that healthcare laundries face are sustainability, competition from disposables, and cost management.

In order to deal with these issues, experts say healthcare laundries must continually grow and change.

“The impact (of these issues) is to see this as an opportunity to make our companies better, stronger and more valuable to the customer as a

partner,” says David Potack, senior vice president of [Unitex](#), a healthcare uniform and linen rental provider.

Laundries competing in healthcare will need to be more professional in their operations by improving employee training, developing stronger management and providing skilled understanding of healthcare regulations and practices, says Keith Ware, vice president of sales for equipment manufacturer [Lavatec Laundry Technology Inc.](#)

“If the laundry cannot provide a hygienic product, meet the customers' linen requirements and do it cost-effectively, their business will suffer,” he says. “Gone are the days where a good employee can progress to the management level without gaining these skills to operate a laundry efficiently and under the many requirements for cleaning healthcare linen.”

Ware says that healthcare laundries must professionalize their businesses and employees, and search for continual improvement.

“Many of the nation's largest laundry companies have struggled or gone out of business by becoming complacent, not reinvesting in their business and not focusing on the customer's needs, wants and desires,” he says.

“If we address these issues openly with customers to develop true partnerships with them, we can improve service and value, creating opportunities for linen, uniform and facility service companies to become stronger and more valuable,” says Joseph Ricci, president and CEO of [TRSA](#), the association for the linen, uniform and facility services industry. “If we do not address them honestly and openly, there will be real challenges from disposable products and pressure to further regulate laundries.”

### INFECTION CONTROL

“Among the many issues facing healthcare laundries, the issue of infection control is enormous and ongoing,” says Nancy Jenkins, executive director for the [American Reusable Textile Association \(ARTA\)](#).

Andrew Rupnow, founder and CEO of [OMNI Solutions](#), a laundry chemistry solutions company, says that infection control is top of the list because clinicians are facing more and more antibiotic-resistant organisms.

“Every part of the healthcare system has to be vigilant to make sure a thorough kill is obtained so that there are no surviving organisms able to adapt and become resistant,” he says.

John Scherberger, president of the [Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council \(HLAC\)](#), believes that healthcare laundry professionals must become familiar with, and be ahead of, the issues coming regarding infection control and the impact it has, now and in the future, on their business and the hospital's business.

“We live in a litigious society where it is getting very common for people to sue businesses, both large and small, for every perceived, alleged or contrived slight or injustice,” he says. “Yes, things happen that are real, unfortunate, hurtful, debilitating or result in death and often accidental and unintentional that should be addressed in a court of law.”

Scherberger suggests that in terms of infection control, healthcare laundry professionals should have a close business relationship with infection prevention professionals who can guide, train and instruct members of the laundry facility.

“Bacteria, spores, viruses and other pathogenic organisms are not going away. They have been around for much longer than humans,” he says. “As medical professionals equip themselves to deal with pathogens and superbug pathogens, the healthcare laundry professional must equip their business with appropriate resources as well.”

Ricci says healthcare laundries need to develop, document and train on processes that improve performance and validation of cleanliness and sustainability of reusable linens, garments and other products.

In addition, he recommends that laundries educate customers regarding the quality assurance, processes, certification and testing regimes that demonstrate the value of outsourcing partners and reusable products, as well as help them reduce costs through improved linen control and management that reduces loss.

### LINEN SECURITY

Besides using processing techniques that eliminate contamination, healthcare laundries need to assure that laundered linens remain clean, to the best of their ability.

Brian Polatsek, CEO of [EcoBrite](#), which provides full rental laundry service for skilled nursing facilities, says that one of the key health benefits of a commercial laundry is the ability to eliminate cross-contamination. Keeping the soil room fully separated and under negative pressure will help ensure that airborne pathogens will not transfer.

Polatsek also says that a proven cart-wash process must be followed as well.

“Staff must be trained to wash hands when leaving the soil area,” he says. “Clean linen should be covered as soon as carts are filled. The linen carts should be covered during transport, even if your linen is wrapped.”

“Because infection control is a critical issue for all healthcare facilities, launderers need to meet the highest standards for processing and delivering hygienically clean linen, work as a partner, and work to educate clients on the correct handling and storage of linen at their locations,” Jenkins says.

Polatsek recommends coordinating with customers regarding the process of storage, distribution and handling so processed goods do not get contaminated. He says that during visits to customer facilities, staff from the laundry should pay attention to ensure that on-site employees are following proper procedure.

“Your chain is no better than its weakest link,” he says.

*Check back Tuesday for part two on disposables and sustainability.*

### About the author



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