Towards A Healthier and Safer Society

Framing the Issue

Society's growing use of energy, water, toxic and hazardous chemicals and the production of waste, greenhouse gases and other pollution now threaten the health of our communities and the health of the planet.

Healthcare leaders in America are increasingly realizing that a healthy environment is a critical component to healthy communities and a healthy workforce. The environment in which hospitals operate is also critical to patient safety and worker safety issues and the overall health of Americans.

Healthcare, representing more than 16% of the national GNP, is a major part of the American economy and is growing. America's leading healthcare leaders understand they are an important part of the communities in which they operate and that they can be forces for broader healing in society. With this intention, major hospital systems, group purchasing organizations, government agencies and leading NGOs have come together to launch the Global Health and Safety Initiative (GHSI).

The Vision

- Healthcare as a major driver for a healthier society, green economy and green jobs
- American healthcare moving upstream to help prevent diseases and accidents rather than only treat them once they occur
- Hospitals as major force to create green chemistry and bio-based products
- Healthcare demonstrating how to build and operate facilities without chemicals and carcinogens linked to respiratory problems, birth defects, cancers and other illnesses
- Hospitals serving organic food to patients and employees and supporting sustainable agriculture in their communities
- Healthcare as a leader in the drive towards renewable energy sources with solar panels and/or wind turbines on hospital roofs throughout America

The Strategy

Healthcare, through the GHSI and other initiatives, is demonstrating leadership in how to make itself and society healthier and safer. Most if not all of the improvements being made by healthcare can be adapted by other industries and communities as well.

Building: Healthcare is undergoing the largest building boom in 40 years. By adopting sustainable building design principles, hospitals can become leaders in green building in America in ways that put the health of people at the cutting edge of 21st century building design, construction and operation.

Purchasing: GHSI has brought together the leading healthcare systems in the country. By working with their Group Purchasing Organizations (which represent more than $100 billion of purchasing power in the marketplace), GHSI will be able to establish specifications for safer and more environmentally responsible products and services and drive the market to get them produced at competitive prices.

Operations: By embedding the "three safeties" (patient, worker and environmental) into healthcare operations, American healthcare can dramatically reduce workplace injuries, cut compensation claims costs, and support patients to heal faster and go home sooner. GHSI is creating a learning community to share best practices and accelerate innovation.

Research: GHSI is launching a new research agenda to understand the links between patient safety, worker safety and environmental sustainability to improve overall patient health and prevent illnesses and accidents. GHSI is developing a healthcare footprint toolkit to help hospitals understand their environmental impact and benchmark progress to reduce it; GHSI will also evaluate the effectiveness of environmentally safer building materials, cleaners and medical products on patient and worker safety and community health.

Public Policy: GHSI will galvanize the moral authority of healthcare leaders to stand up for climate protection, green chemistry, healthier food production and other critical community and global health issues facing our nation. GHSI is supporting a global phase out of all mercury containing products in healthcare and is already well on its way to accomplishing this goal in the U.S. and Europe.

Recommendations for Government:

1. Provide support and incentives for hospitals to reduce their carbon footprint and purchase more renewable energy sources

2. Join with GHSI in making it an engine to build a greener and healthier economy that puts community health and benefits to our communities at the center of the new economy.

Recommendations for Private Sector and Industry:

3. Partner with GHSI to manufacture more climate friendly, toxic free, and inherently safer technologies and products that the healthcare sector can buy.

4. Model the vision of GHSI by greening their own supply chain and bringing greater safety and sustainability to their own businesses and to society at large.

For more information, see GHSI website: www.globalhealthsafety.org
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