

Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle: How to Establish an Eco-Friendly Medical Practice

BY LYNNE MICHELLE

We are aware of the importance of saving our environment, and many of us do our part at home by recycling, driving energy-efficient cars, and turning the furnace down at night. But do those earth-friendly habits follow you into your medical practice? There are many options for turning your office into an eco-friendly practice.

A green strategy requires careful research and planning. Much of the savings to your practice will come with well-considered decisions that *prevent* or *reduce* waste in the first place – waste of materials, waste of your employees' time, and waste of your practice's hard-earned money.

Integrate the 3Rs Into Your Practice

Just as we had to learn the basic "3Rs" in elementary school to prepare ourselves for life as responsible adults, we can prepare ourselves to go green based on a foundation for environmental awareness with the 3Rs: **Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle**. They make good business sense for medical practices in today's economy. An environmentally aware practice can generate less waste and reduce operating costs by practicing the 3Rs. Every time you buy new heating or cooling equipment, electronics, or office equipment, your choices affect the environment. You can save money *and* the environment by understanding energy use and actually reduce your energy bill by 30 percent when you purchase the most energy-efficient products for your practice.

Choose Your Electronics Wisely

By upgrading old products with new, efficient systems, your practice can save energy. For most practices, the computer is the central tool of the office. According to the Department of Energy, office equipment accounts for 16 percent of an office's energy use. Visit the Federal Government's Energy Star website www.energystar.gov/smallbiz to browse office equipment that cuts down the use of energy and reduces pollution. By joining ENERGY STAR® for Small Businesses, you can activate free tech-

nical support and ongoing green strategies for your practice with the use of a guide for small businesses on how to achieve energy efficiency. Some of what you will learn, for example, is that an ENERGY STAR-certified computer is going to be 52% more efficient than a standard one.

Manage E-Waste Responsibly

Now that your practice has purchased new energy-efficient computers, what do you do with the old ones?

Don't throw them away! Why not? Why be concerned about old electronic equipment? Unfortunately, electronic waste is the fastest-growing segment of municipal land-fills around the world, with more than two million tons of electronics discarded every year. Some components in most electronic and electrical products contain hazardous or toxic materials, such as lead, mercury, chromium, arsenic,

and cadmium. This includes computer monitors, printed circuit boards, batteries, and switches and relays. While these toxics are not a problem when consumers use these products, they can create environmental problems if they are discarded with disposable trash. Businesses and institutions must manage electronic devices and components in a manner consistent with state and federal law.

Consider Alternatives to Disposal

There are alternatives for managing your unwanted electronics. Review the options below to find one convenient for you and your practice:

Reduce (or Prevent) Waste in the First Place

- *Lease equipment.* When acquiring new computer equipment, ask and learn about lease options. Because users do not assume ownership of the product in a lease arrangement, the old unit is returned to the vendor, often for a credit toward a future purchase.

- *Identify durable products.* When shopping for electronic and electrical items, review the product's repair history and consumer reliability ratings first.

- *Repair instead of replace.* Repairing an electronic or electrical item may be cheaper than replacing it. Even

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an older device may still have life in it. Opting for repair may save your practice thousands of dollars.

- **Buy upgradeable gear.** Some products can be upgraded by replacing a single component instead of the entire unit. This saves money and reduces waste.

- **Buy all-in-one machines.** Equipment that combines multiple functions into one device, such as a printer with scanning and fax capability, usually saves money and office space.

Reuse or Resell

- **Resale.** While you may have outgrown a working electronic or electrical device, someone else may need that very item. Many firms specialize in buying and selling used computers.

- **Donations.** Schools, non-profits, and charitable organizations often accept working electronic and electrical goods. Donations may be tax-deductible.

- **Dealer or manufacturer takeback.** Some dealers, retailers, or manufacturers will take back old equipment when new equipment is purchased. This can save you the time and trouble of disposing of obsolete items.

Recycle

- Recycling, once considered an extreme pastime for an enthusiastic few, diverted 82 million tons of material away from landfills and incinerators in 2006 – a great success and a definite necessity for the environment.

- Recycling, in fact, is one of the best environmental success stories of the late 20th century. We usually think of plastic bottles, aluminum cans, and used paper when we think of recycling. However, if you're going to be smart about recycling within the medical practice, you must consider recycling everything possible, including toner cartridges, plastic, aluminum, glass, all types of paper, cardboard, telephone books, and especially electronic products and equipment.

- As electronic products become obsolete or simply wear out, the challenge arises for their safe disposal. You may want to seek office equipment with remanufactured or recycled parts. Most computer companies remanufacture printers and copiers by rebuilding and

upgrading returned products and parts to “as new” appearance and performance. Not only does recycling old electronic equipment keep hazardous materials out of landfills, it can cut your purchasing costs as well.

Implement an Electronic Records System

Using your electronic equipment to override paper waste can be one of the biggest money-savers to your practice. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, each employee generates 1.5 pounds of waste

paper per day. Over time, that's a lot of paper. With charts, forms, and more forms, it's no wonder there is so much paper waste in a medical office. So, what can you do to help the environment? First, your practice may want to consider the implementation of an electronic health record (EHR) program, which means that an individual patient's medical record is stored on a computer rather than a

paper chart. It may be made up of electronic medical records (EMRs) from many locations and/or sources. A variety of types of healthcare-related information may be stored and accessed in this way. EHR systems are believed to increase physician efficiency and reduce costs as well as promote standardization of care. Additionally, physical records usually require significant amounts of space to store them. When physical records are no longer maintained, large amounts of costly storage space are no longer required. Paper, film, and other expensive physical media usage (and therefore cost) is also reduced with electronic record storage. Furthermore, when paper records are stored in different locations, collecting and transporting them to a single location for review by a healthcare provider is time-consuming. When paper (or other types of) records are required in multiple locations, copying, faxing, and transporting costs are significant. Even though EMR systems with computerized provider order entry (CPOE) have existed for more than 30 years, less than 10 percent of hospitals (as of 2006) have a fully integrated system.

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Unexpected Benefits

By making a choice to go green, you may reap unexpected benefits—for example, an admirable reputation as a conscientious and responsible medical group that can lead to increased customer loyalty. Your efforts to help preserve the environment will not go unnoticed by your practice clientele. Making the choice for your practice to go green then becomes another great way to market yourself while saving money.

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Minimize Paper Usage

If the development of an EHR is not an option for your medical practice, then encourage employees to reduce paper and ink by determining which activities can be accomplished online rather than generating a paper trail. Buy recycled paper and make full use of that paper by printing on both sides whenever possible. View documents on your computer and use e-mail to send documents rather than printing or faxing them; make hard copies only when necessary. Use discarded paper that is only printed on one side for scratch paper. Do your proof-reading and edits on your computer before printing to reduce the number of prints you make. Most importantly, have all of your practice information on the Internet for patients to retrieve instead of handing them a stack of paper. Reuse file folders by placing new labels over the old ones. All of these changes are easy to make and can have a big impact.

Reduce Your Office Energy Consumption

Are you aware that heating, cooling, and powering office space are responsible for almost 40 percent of carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S. and consume more than 70 percent of total electricity usage? You can save about 10 percent on the electric bill for your practice simply by adjusting the thermostat by one or two degrees. Use automatic setback thermostats. These thermostats automatically adjust the temperature settings for weekends and evenings, when people are not in the office. Consider outside air economizers that use outside air to cool down buildings when the air outside is cooler than the air inside. Think about solar shading. You can use a reflective roof coating and/or window films and shading to reduce the amount of heat from the sun that penetrates your office building. Keep the blinds closed. In the winter, this will conserve heat in the office and, in the summer, it will keep heat out.

Another way you can go green in your office is as easy as replacing a lightbulb – in fact, it *is* changing a lightbulb. Did you know that incandescent bulbs use four times more energy than is necessary to produce light? Compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) use 75% less energy to produce the same amount of light, last 10 times longer, and produce less heat.

Optimizing the energy settings for computers and other devices can be more than a modest energy saver. Set computers to energy-saving settings, making sure to shut them down when you leave for the day. “Standby” settings continue to draw power even when not in use. Printers, scanners, and other peripherals used only occasionally can be unplugged until they’re needed.

A wealth of suggestions and products for energy conservation in offices can be found online and with your local waste management service. Research available options and customize them to suit your practice needs.

Going Green Can Make a Huge Difference

The efforts you make toward an eco-friendly medical practice don’t have to be large. You can change your buying habits to be greener in small ways – for example, by purchasing recycled paper products for office use. Consistently reducing the amount of energy and paper your medical practice uses can make a huge difference in the long run, both to the environment and to your bottom line. Review your options with careful consideration: recycle parts, donate computers and their components to schools or charities, or return equipment to the supplier. Update your electronics to reduce operating costs over time, and dispose of unusable products responsibly.

“Going green” is good for the environment, easier to implement than you might think, and can save your practice money. Once you have committed to and employed an environmentally sound, cost-saving strategy for your practice, you’ll find it’s easy being green!

For more information, contact BSM Consulting at 1-800-832-0609.