HOW HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS HANDLE UNIFORM AND LINEN LAUNDERING

BY RYAN MCHUGH

Unlike for restaurants and the hospitality industry, what makes healthcare uniform and linen laundering unique is the type of contaminants which must be cleaned and sanitized before the materials can be safely reused.

While other industries have embraced outsourced laundry services to remove the costs of labor and machinery upkeep or replacement expenses, healthcare providers have nevertheless been traditionally limited to in-house, on-premise laundry (OPL) facilities out of consideration of their liability and responsibility for ensuring the safe laundering of medical uniforms and linens.

Despite the complexity of medical linen and uniform cleaning requirements, new avenues are opening to provide the same convenience of offsite laundering services to the healthcare industry.

Throughout this in-depth white paper, we take a closer look at how modern medical practices and hospitals are handling their uniform and linen laundering needs—exploring not only the cleaning standards and legal compliance requirements for sanitizing various medical materials, but also how medical laundry services today are able to safely meet these laundry needs.

Considering the complicated and highly-regulated cleaning process for medical uniforms and linens combined with the difficulty in maintaining surveillance on an offsite launderer, traditionally healthcare providers elect to manage laundry in-house.

Although the protection of both patients and employees from hazards is a number one priority for healthcare, when there is a massive hospital with hundreds of patients and emergencies to manage each day, it can nevertheless become difficult for even the most disciplined facilities to be sure no hazards ever slip through the cracks.

Today however, healthcare providers are able to take advantage of outsourced laundry services with a greater degree of reliability thanks to the Healthcare Laundries Accreditation Council (HLAC).
The leading accreditation body for medical laundry providers, HLAC is designed to evaluate the sanitation and safety practices of offsite laundry services. Before accrediting any laundry providers, HLAC first sends an inspector (typically unannounced) to ensure each step in the provider’s service process is safe and up to standard. Although hospitals, medical practices, and other healthcare providers are ultimately responsible for ensuring the sanitation of their uniforms and linens, contracting with HLAC-accredited laundry service providers still offers peace of mind that the medical materials are clean—without requiring healthcare providers to constantly keep an eye on their laundry services.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LAUNDERING NEEDS OF HEALTHCARE UNIFORMS AND LINENS

When it comes to medical uniforms and equipment, these materials regularly come in contact with many of the dangerous and infectious hazards the healthcare industry poses—including body fluids and viruses such as HIV or HBV.

With viruses and other bloodborne pathogens able to quickly spread within a closed hospital environment if contaminants are not properly stored, secured, and sanitized, ensuring medical linens or uniforms that have been used in exposure situations are properly cleaned is essential to keeping patients and employees protected from health hazards.

According to guidelines laid out by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, safe laundering and sanitation practices for linens and uniforms are not only a good idea for safety—they’re required by law while working in potentially infectious environments.

As such, medical uniforms and protective equipment should be used only in workspaces where potentially infectious contaminants and waste are present, and never leave the work area without proper decontamination and laundering.

MEDICAL UNIFORMS

Healthcare uniforms are defined specifically as specialized clothing and equipment worn by medical staff for protecting against the hazards that medical workspaces can pose, and are often otherwise known as personal protective equipment (PPE).
While there may be a few smaller hospital uniform components such as gloves or surgical masks which are also necessary for ensuring safe work environments, the primary medical uniforms needing laundry services include:

- Lab Coats
- Scrubs
- Aprons, Smocks or Other Protective Clothing

Although some healthcare providers in the past have chosen to have employees launder their own uniforms in order to cut costs, this can eventually lead to steep fines and potentially serious consequences like infectious contaminants being brought home and causing outbreaks outside the hospital or medical practice.

HEALTHCARE LINENS
On the other side of things like uniforms for healthcare employees and staff, there are also numerous linens required for each room which have the potential to expose patients to the same contaminants and hazards medical uniforms can expose employees to.

While the gowns for patients just one example, other medical linens needed during patient stays which must be laundered and fully sanitized before use include:

- Wash Cloths
- Sheets
- Thermal or Bath Blankets
- Patient Gowns

Like medical uniforms—healthcare linens carry the same exposure risks and require the same care during handling to minimize the risk.

Despite this similarity though, the volume of linens required during each day for the hundreds of patients moving in and out of hospital rooms can often lead healthcare providers to bad handling habits.

Never transport contaminated laundry in open containers like hospitality laundry carts. Instead, make use of containers or bags for transporting medical linens prior to laundering, and be sure that during the laundering process the workspace is a closed environment so as to ensure all contaminants remain contained.
APPLICABLE HEALTHCARE LAUNDRY LAWS AND REGULATIONS

When it comes to regulating medical uniform and linen laundering, standards laid out by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) such as the Bloodborne Pathogen Standard are likely to be a primary concern for hospitals and medical practices to keep in mind.

The OSHA Bloodborne Pathogens Standard essentially lays out and defines the standards and regulations required for ensuring the sanitation of healthcare linens and uniforms—imposing not only strict regulations, but potentially steep fines and long-term PR impacts for noncompliance as well.

Within the finer details of the actual OSHA Bloodborne Pathogen Standard, there are countless subsections and requirements which must be strictly adhered to—ranging from the specific definitions and designations for Other Potentially Infectious Materials (OPIMs), to exposure controls and proper cleaning practices.

OSHA’s guidelines specifically touch on contaminated laundry—defining both what contaminated laundry specifically is along with laying out a list of requirements for how contaminated laundry must be handled so as to prevent the possibility of exposure.

CONCLUSION

Although food service or other industries may be able to close for one day a week or holidays, unfortunately there are no days off when it comes to people getting hurt, sick, or even giving birth—making it critical there is always a fresh supply of clean linens for patients and uniforms for the staff members treating them.

Considering the size of hospitals and the number of patients coming through their doors in need of care, the sheer volume of materials needed now begs the question—how do you plan to handle the laundering of medical linens and uniforms?

Is Your Laundry Service Provider HLAC Accredited?
Letting an external healthcare laundry service provider clean medical materials can not only cut the high cost of managing laundry in-house from budgets, but also allow healthcare providers to primarily focus on caring for patients. Despite this convenience though, be sure your provider is HLAC accredited to ensure compliance with all legal requirements.

Are You Aware of All Medical Linen and Uniform Sanitation Requirements?
For medical practices and hospitals opting for maximum control of the cleaning process by laundering linens and uniforms in-house, ensure all employees are fully up-to-date with all components of the Bloodborne Pathogens Standard to avoid accidental exposure to OPIMs.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

How Uniform and Linen Rental Services Benefit the Healthcare Industry
There are numerous pros and cons to both renting and purchasing uniforms or linens, but when it comes to healthcare, the needs of large hospitals will often leave healthcare providers leaning toward rental services. Taking a closer look at the healthcare industry, this in-depth white paper explores the various upsides and potential drawbacks to renting uniforms and linens.

HLAC: What It Is and Why Your Healthcare Facility Should Care
Although in the past healthcare providers were limited to in-house laundry because of highly-regulated sanitation standards, certifications by the Healthcare Laundries Accreditation Council (HLAC) are now able to provide hospitals and medical practices the assurance that their outsourced laundry services are compliant with all regulations and laws. Learn more about HLAC and how it can benefit the healthcare industry here.

Outsourcing Laundry Services or On-Premise: Which Will You Choose?
While it’s somewhat a given for hotels, restaurants, and hospitals to provide their visitors with linens like napkins or hospital gowns, the better question to ask is how these organizations ensure their materials are always clean. With this in-depth white paper, we provide the breakdown on both in-house and outsourced laundry services along with service recommendations by industry.