

a healthy practice

Boulder hospital reduces waste, also saves money

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Kai Abelkis, sustainability coordinator for Boulder Community Foothills Hospital, sits on a loading dock where recyclables await pickup. (RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Kai Abelkis rescues a Coke can from a truck-sized trash bin behind the hospital, where piles of used coffee grounds sit for gardeners and a burned-out computer awaits recycling.

"We're not perfect. We're not zero-waste yet," Abelkis says.

But Boulder Community Foothills Hospital, with solar panels on its roof and native, arid-loving

bushes in its landscaping, is perhaps the closest to zero-waste of any hospital in the country.

With an international reputation for being green, Foothills is at the forefront of a movement to cut down on the 6,600 tons of waste American hospitals dump each day.

At Foothills, babies' bottoms are tucked into cloth diapers. Kitchen workers scrape uneaten peas and cheese off china



Lesley Arland of Broomfield changes her newborn daughter Grace's cloth diaper at Boulder Community Foothills Hospital last week. To reduce waste, the hospital does not use disposable diapers. (Photos by RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post) plates — not plastic — and into a compost bin. Paper towels in the bathroom go into a bag made of corn starch, which is sent out for composting.

In all, 42 percent of waste generated by the Boulder Community Hospital system is recycled, reused or eliminated.

Abelkis, whose job title is sustainability coordinator, is really like the garbage police — poking around in offices he has outfitted with recycling bins and closets where boxes of used batteries wait for him.

Ten years ago, the main branch of Boulder Community Hospital had its trash picked up every two or three days. Now, the trash collectors need to come only about every 10 days.

As hospitals around the world strive to waste less, visitors have come to Boulder from as far away as New Zealand and from almost every state in the country to soak up some of the hospital's green practices. The whole Boulder Community Hospital system is green, but the Foothills campus, built in 2003, was the first in the nation to be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified.

"We're starting to make the connection with community health and the health of the environment," Abelkis said. "If 'do no harm' is our mantra inside our walls, then we need



to look at our operations and what it does outside our walls."

Saves resources, money

Few hospitals even have a sustainability coordinator. Some don't even recycle paper, said Eileen Secrest, communications director of Practice Greenhealth, a health care networking organization based in Virginia.

"It's just a matter of getting all the hospitals in the nation to try to do something greener," Secrest said. "They can reduce their costs, they can lessen their impact on the environment, and they can save resources. In the long run, it contributes to the health of the community."

The health care culture doesn't easily lend itself to conservation — hospitals make more money when they do more procedures, which translates to more waste. Also, there are the mounds of paperwork and the fact that making things sterile often means yards and yards of plastic.

At most hospitals, surgical instruments are wrapped like packages in blue, porous wrap. The package is sterilized with steam and then unwrapped by gloved hands in the operating room.

Boulder Community Hospital switched to reusable metal containers for sterilization in 2003 and saved about \$150,000 annually in blue wrap.

But even Foothills can't recycle the disposable gowns and synthetic gloves that visitors and staff snap on every time they enter certain patients' rooms.

Consider the waste from a month's worth of supplies: Children's Hospital in Aurora, on average, orders 604,893 synthetic gloves, 28,163 gowns and 43,506 disposable diapers every month.

About 10 percent to 20 percent of hospital garbage is medical waste that has to go into an incinerator or through high- pressure sterilization on its way to a landfill. That includes bandages, body tissue, blood and anything else that touched a patient who has an infectious disease.

But the vast majority of hospital trash is similar to the kind generated by hotels — a box of tissue

for every patient room, toiletries, linens, food service.

Besides Boulder Community, Children's Hospital is one of the only others in Colorado with a full-time conservationist.

When sustainability manager John Hudgens started a year and a half ago, the hospital was recycling



Boulder Community Hospital is one of the nation's greenest hospitals. They recycle or reuse about 40 percent of everything. Dishwasher Admir Mahic tosses leftover food into the compost can in the hospital dining room kitchen. (RJ Sangosti/ The Denver Post)
cardboard and shredded documents containing patients' health and financial data. Now, it recycles other types of paper, cans and glass.

Children's will save an estimated \$100,000 per year by turning off computers at night and about \$20,000 in material and staff by getting its plastic identification bracelets delivered in reusable plastic totes instead of boxes.

"And that's just one little product," said Hudgens, who called Foothills the "flagship" of green hospitals.

Persuading suppliers to change their packaging is huge when it comes to reducing hospital waste. Even more important is instilling a culture of conservation, Abelkis said.

From the compostable corn- starch cups in the mom-and- baby department at Foothills to the recycle tubs near every desk, it's clear Abelkis has won over the staff.

"It's not a mandate at this hospital. It's not a policy," Abelkis said. "It's what we do. It's a culture."