

Laundry service workers: Critical to care

Sterile linens and gowns are essential to protect the health and safety of patients and workers.

To ensure the highest standards, laundry workers in health care facilities require specialized skills and training. Care and attention to detailed procedures are needed to protect workers from exposure to bacteria and infections. As well, the powerful chemicals and high temperatures required to clean and sterilize linens pose risks.

Workers come into contact with dangerous substances including sharps, drugs, chemicals and bodily fluids. They are particularly susceptible to salmonella and scabies from contaminated linen.

The specialized knowledge and skills needed to avoid contamination are acquired on the job. Non-health sector laundry workers do not have the skills and knowledge to keep patients and workers healthy and safe.

Public sector laundry workers are a critical part of the health care team.

On the front line

Different health facilities and departments require unique sets of skills.

Operating room linens are made of a special fluid-resistant material, requiring separate laundering.

Because of the sensitivity of surgical procedures, a higher degree of cleanliness and scrutiny is required. Each item must be checked carefully on a light table for holes, lint and loose fibers to ensure that patients are not infected by stray particles during surgery.

'Isolation' laundry is washed separately in manually-loaded machines, and special treatment is required for certain items.

Different fabrics must be washed separately, as they tolerate specific chemicals or heat levels.

One laundry worker, a CUPE member with the Hospital Employees' Union in British Columbia, says, "It takes weeks to learn the job and maintain continuity, but it takes months to learn to do the job efficiently."

Contracting out doesn't work

Contracting out laundry services is not cost-effective because it leads to high turnover. In one BC hospital, contracting out to a commercial laundry meant linens often came back out of order, soiled by other laundry and so tangled they had to be thrown out.

Items were returned that did not belong, while other items disappeared. Staff would take their uniforms home to wash them since they often came back dirty having been washed with heavily soiled items.

These concerns led the hospital to bring laundry services back in-house.

Higher costs

One of the largest nursing homes in Newfoundland and Labrador planned to contract out its laundry services to cut costs and avoid duplication. But an employer study revealed that contracting out would increase costs significantly.

As a result, laundry services remained in-house. The cost savings were so great, all previously contracted out laundry services in St. John's area nursing homes were also brought back in-house.

A consulting firm reviewed the performance of K-Bro, a US-owned, Alberta-based company, providing laundry services at a hospital in Cumberland, BC. The review looked at operational efficiency, overall costs and prospects for improvement.

The study recommended the contract with K-Bro be terminated. The hospital is now buying the plant and equipment and will operate the laundry directly.

Lost jobs, lower wages, poorer quality

At the same time, K-Bro has been awarded a contract to provide laundry services to health care facilities in the Fraser Valley – by shipping BC hospital laundry to Alberta.

On top of the environmental cost of trucking laundry back and forth to Alberta, contracting out and moving laundry services to another province has cost two BC communities 43 jobs and \$1.5 million in economic activity.

Worse still, it was recently discovered that K-Bro was laundering hospital birthing sheets in standard washers designed for personal laundry, exposing mothers and newborns to serious risks of infection.

In 1995, K-Bro sparked a strike by Calgary laundry workers that led to a major wildcat walkout by other hospital workers including dietary, food service and maintenance workers and radiologists. The key concern was job security but strikers were also protesting the impact that contracting out would have on patients, workers and costs.

Keep it public

The evidence shows that when housekeeping services are contracted out, standards fall and turnover soars, endangering patients and adding costs.

Privatizing laundry services puts an essential part of our health system at risk.

Contracting out CUPE members' work undermines public health care.

hgb*opeiu491
Updated October 2003