Recycling boosts Iowa Health’s bottom line

BY TODD RAZOR

Hospitals have reused surgical tools such as drill bits, saw blades and tourniquets for decades. And though it may not be the first thing that comes to mind when considering health care, the reprocessing of medical supplies has provided a shot in the arm to the state’s largest health-care organization.

In the past three years, Iowa Health System has saved nearly $2 million and diverted more than 84,000 pounds of waste from entering landfills through three medical device reprocessing programs.

The nonprofit organization, which under its umbrella has 25 hospitals, nearly 20,000 employees and more than 140 physician clinics, implemented the initiatives as part of an overall plan to reduce its carbon footprint.

Fourteen of Iowa Health’s senior-affiliate hospitals — including Iowa Methodist Medical Center, Blank Children’s Hospital, Iowa Lutheran Hospital and Methodist West Hospital in Greater Des Moines — have embraced one or more of the programs, and smaller rural hospitals are starting to come on line.

“We’re avoiding all those one-time-use landfills products,” said Connie Boss, director of surgical services contracting with Iowa Health. “We send them to someone who will remanufacture them and sell them back to us at a significant savings.”

In October, the Iowa Recycling Association recognized Iowa Health by presenting it with the Murray J. Fox Recycling Innovation Award, which is intended to acknowledge businesses and other organizations that develop, manufacture and market sustainable products.

Boss, a 29-year Iowa Health clinician who spent the first five years of her career working in operating rooms, said educating Iowa Health’s administrators, physicians and employees about the benefits of repurposing medical equipment has helped the programs take root.

Her department also has buy-in from the organization’s CEO and board of directors, who she said are equally concerned with environmental stewardship as they are with saving money.

“The more we reprocess, the more our capital bill for brand-new technology is forgiven,” Boss said, giving as an example the recycling of Nellcor pulse oximetry sensors, medical devices that are used to measure blood-oxygen levels.

Through that program, Iowa Health has saved $57,000 since September 2009.

First, hospitals ship used sensors to Monterey, Calif.-based Sensortech Services LLC, which sorts, counts, inspects, cleans and repackages them.

“Sensortech credits our account to execute another recycling program that centers on small medical procedure trays and metal supplies used for procedures such as molding lacerrations,” Boss said.

Hospitals send instruments such as suture sets to Centurion, which provides rebates dollars for those that can be remanufactured. Those that can’t be reused are recycled.

The rebates are used to buy new supplies, many of which are

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remanufactured themselves. Since October 2008, Iowa Health said that program has saved it more than $43,000.

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Since 2007, Iowa Health has steadily increased its participation...
Industry got started in the late 1990s

industries began to look at reprocessing pathways. The first reprocessing program to be launched was by the Mayo Foundation in the early 1990s. The program was successful and other hospitals and organizations began to follow suit. The industry continued to grow and expand, with new programs being launched every year. In 2000, the FDA began regulating the practice of third-party medical device reprocessing, which led to an increase in the number of programs. The industry has continued to grow, with new programs being launched every year.