

From Trash to Triage: Surplus Saves Lives

The sheer volume of medical surplus that can collect in a healthcare facility's basement or storage space can be jaw-dropping. Storage space in most healthcare facilities is very limited. In these premium spaces, the accumulation of surplus medical supplies can easily grow out-of-hand. Thousands of useless IV poles, rendered obsolete by a new pump design, can choke walkways. Storage spaces can get flooded with unwanted equipment and pharmaceuticals. Mountains of outdated electronics can pile up to the ceiling. This kind of buildup can result in violations and substantial fines.

Space considerations aside, extra supplies are also costly to dispose of and cumbersome to manage. Disposal charges aren't cheap at \$700 and \$800 per dumpster. Despite these high costs, over 2,000 tons of unused surgical supplies – the estimated equivalent of 200 million dollars – are thrown away every year.

While some healthcare facilities simply eat the high costs to keep the waste moving, others are taking a closer look and recognizing that improved methods of surplus management yield only positive results: cost reduction, regulatory compliance, a more organized facility, improved efficiency, and improved healthcare. Healthcare facilities across the nation are cleaning up and going green. In the process, they are saving more than just money – they're saving lives. How? By putting unwanted, but useful, medical surplus back to work.

Healthcare providers know, better than anyone, that without sutures, needles, syringes or bandages, even basic medical treatment may not be possible. Yet simple, life-saving items often end up in the trash. We all know about recycling, the commonly embraced method for sweeping clean piles of medical surplus without taxing the landfill, but another disposal alternative, known as "medical recovery," is earning the respect of healthcare facilities nationwide.

Let's face it – surplus happens in the course of normal operations. For example, a nurse pulls out three double-wrapped sutures and removes the outer wrap, but uses only one. The remaining two (technically still sterile) sutures are now considered garbage according to US policy. They *can*, however, be used in other countries.

Healthcare facilities are becoming more interested in donating surplus items (from sutures to beds) rather than throwing them in the trash because it saves money, is more environmentally friendly than recycling or reuse, and because, though they are no longer considered useable in the US, surplus medical supplies can still help save lives. Most healthcare facilities simply don't have the time, staff or systems in place to handle vast amounts of surplus. Recognizing the need and the commodity at hand, several companies are facilitating the recovery of unwanted medical surplus and putting them back to work in developing countries where people are literally dying every day for lack of even the most basic medical supplies.

Global Links and the Institution Recycling Network are two companies that function as middlemen between healthcare facilities in the US and facilities in countries like Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. These middleman companies and others like them are helping hospitals eliminate surplus and the problems that hover over dormant piles of medical surplus. In the process, they're helping to save lives.

Medical recovery is old hat to many non-profits who have a well-established international circuit for secondhand goods. It's certainly a concept that's second nature to Global Links, a Pittsburgh-based medical relief and development organization dedicated to a two-fold mission of environmental stewardship and improving health in developing countries.

"It's only waste if you throw it away – if you waste it," says Kathleen Hower, Executive Director and co-founder of Global Links.



Surplus medical supplies, equipment and furnishings are collected, prepared and stored in Global Links' 23,000 square foot warehouse in Pittsburgh, PA before being sent to hospitals throughout Latin America.

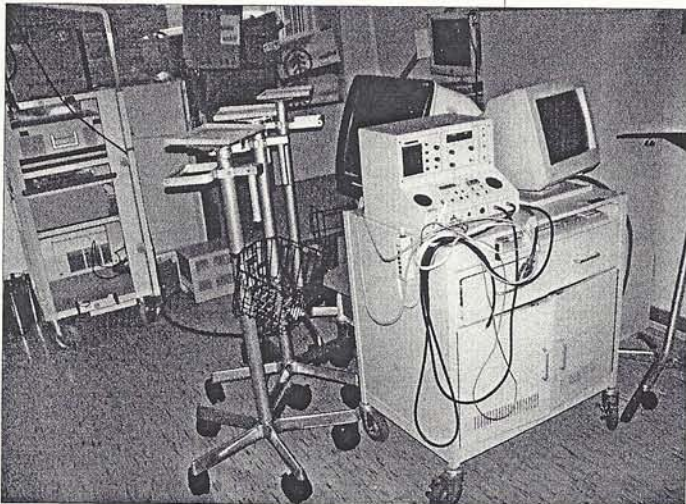
Since 1989, the non-profit organization has redirected more than 3,000 tons of medical materials worth \$155 million to more than 70 countries around the world. "That's life-affirming," says Hower, fresh from her recent visit to Guatemala, where Global Links has delivered over ten shipments via a 40-foot sea container since 2007.

Hower's agenda on this latest mission to the rugged, mountainous country included a visit to Coatepeque Hospital, located 220 kilometers west of Guatemala City, near the Mexican Border. She attended the inauguration of a new Intensive Care Unit that Global Links helped to furnish with donated ICU beds, monitors, and other supplies that could have ended up in a landfill.

"It is beautiful," says Hower of the new unit. "It's a lovely building with a lot of natural light. Patient rooms are separated by glass enclosures, very modern, painted pale blue, a very restful color, all beds made up, a monitor in each unit, a heart fibulator, (and) some service carts." The quaint ICU is a much-needed addition to the medical facility. It includes many things most US hospital patients and visitors take for granted, like chairs. Before the unit opened, Hower toured the hospital, encountering scenes all-too-familiar in places like Coatepeque, where people make due with very little. In an open ward, filled with people and void of monitors, Hower watched as doctors placed a chest tube in one of the patients.

Better care equals a better chance to survive critical illness or trauma. Thanks to hospital donations, opportunities for the citizens of this small Guatemalan town have greatly improved. "They were very excited, and so grateful. We sent a 40-foot sea container for that hospital full of beds, gurneys, supplies. Imagine a container 40 feet from floor to ceiling filled with what

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Diagnostic and examination equipment is staged prior to packing and shipment from Manchester (CT) Memorial Hospital. (IRN Photo)

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you need – all recovered from US hospitals,” says Hower.

Though Global Links is not the only organization that handles medical surplus, they are exceptional in that they are able to handle everything from sutures to IV poles to mechanical beds at no charge to the hospital. This offers a tremendous alternative to dump fees. “They [hospitals] don’t have to pay for anything, but we have to have the open communication,” says Angela Garcia, Deputy Director of Global Links. Garcia says that Global Links needs to know what the product is in order to find the right second home for it and to coordinate the efforts between partners.

Many medical recovery organizations won’t handle expired or broken items. Global Links takes pride in giving gifts that reflect the giver. “Our goal is to send solutions not other problems,” says Hower.

With the World Health Organization as their legal consignee, Global Links can coordinate with ministries of health in destination countries like Cuba, where hurricanes Gustav and Ike wrecked havoc on hospitals and supplies. They also work with multiple organizations in the US to coordinate pickup, packaging, delivery, and storage efforts nationwide. “If they’re mechanical beds we’ll be there yesterday,” says Garcia.

Garcia and Hower emphasize that items of low-dollar value can make a huge difference where there is little – or nothing to be had.



These are furnishings from Baystate Health System in Springfield, MA. This was a multiple container project. The surplus comprised most of the furnishings and equipment from a building that’s being demolished in advance of new construction. (IRN Photo)

“If you don’t have stitches you can’t have a surgery,” says Garcia. Keeping a suture out of the waste stream and putting it into the recovery stream saves lives. “No matter what happens in a hospital, babies are born. You can’t start a c-section if you don’t have suture,” she says.

Basic materials, for instance blood pressure monitors that allow doctors to follow a woman’s pregnancy, proper medication for a woman with high blood pressure, and other items easily taken for granted, create opportunities for healthier moms and babies. But, healthcare facilities can also donate surplus premium items, such as baby blankets and shampoo, which can be offered as “gifts” to entice new mothers into making the often long, hard journey to the hospital. The

practice of contributing to better healthcare is something that Global Links values in their holistic approach to giving.

In addition to the environmental and social benefits of medical recovery, there are several other good reasons a healthcare facility might choose to donate medical surplus for recovery. Certainly there are the financial considerations. Storage, dumpster, and refurbishing fees can make getting rid of stuff a big figure in the budget.

Dealing in volume can be beneficial to a healthcare facility’s budget, according to Mark Lennon co-founder and CEO of the Institute of Recycling Network (IRN), a recycling

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cooperative headquartered in New Hampshire. "Hospitals can take a zero-budget hit if they can get rid of surplus on an ongoing basis. Setting up the routine makes a lot of sense," says Lennon.

Referred to as the one-stop matchmaker of the recycling world, IRN has connections to numerous and diverse sources that recycle and reuse. The company makes strong strides in business because its staff keeps track of both commodity markets and brokers who handle recyclables. "It's really a whole world unto itself," says Lennon, who demonstrates a clear understanding of the non-profit circuit. IRN distinguishes itself as a professional operation complete with backup equipment and impeccable timing. "This is not a local charity experience," says Lennon.

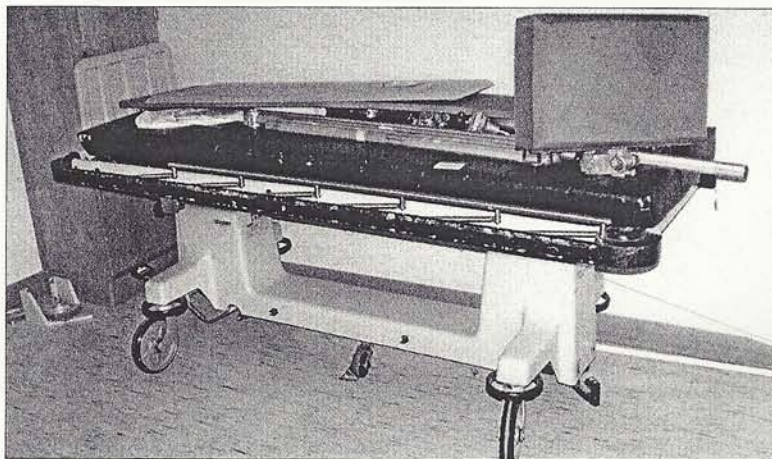
In addition to their budget-wise, routine customers, IRN manages single pick-ups for large quantities of surplus anywhere in the country. "The mover will do an inventory, which is what we offer to the non-profits," says Lennon. "Once we've identified a match with the non-profit then we'll coordinate to dispatch the right size container or trailer and the moving crew." The order is then shipped immediately to its destination, courtesy of the non-profit.

IRN handles small loads of surplus and consolidates them into larger loads that are valuable to their network of relief and economic development partners. IRN has established relationships with over a dozen US and international relief organizations that use surplus property to establish or furnish schools, hospitals, and clinics in the US and abroad. "The demand for anything that has to do with a hospital is overwhelming," says Lennon. "We would love to see more medical equipment," he adds.

For the donor hospital working with businesses like IRN, the cost of a pickup is based on volume and depends upon the distance traveled. By the time a container is packed full, it can hold three to four dumpster-sized loads, which saves the hospital money. "We're a lot cheaper than \$700-\$800 a ton, and we're a lot more efficient," says Lennon.

Cleaning out the hallways, stairwells, and closets of unused surplus appeases unannounced inspectors, but hospitals say that recovering surplus for donation also raises the consciousness of hospital employees which, once again, saves money. Medical recovery can also work to a healthcare facility's advantage in public relations, both internally and externally. Donations can impact a non-profit healthcare facility's community benefit statement in a very positive way. Both IRN and Global Link provide feedback from recipients of surplus orders for that very purpose. According to the experts, the gift should go with no risk to the hospital. Non-profits should sign a waiver releasing equipment and supplies from liability.

Global Links and IRN agree that the need for medical surplus is vast and the channels are



Gurneys, hospital beds, and in-room furnishings were among the 30 tons of surplus sent for reuse from Manchester (CT) Memorial Hospital earlier this year. (IRN Photo)

open for donors. "Hospitals are greening right now. Its time to take a second look at what you're going to do with the wing you've just

cleaned out," says Lennon. "There's a lot more that *can* be recovered than *cannot* – that's a win for all sides." 