Maintaining Patient Slings:
How to Make Sure a Healthcare Boon isn’t a Laundry Headache

BY DERI ROSS PRYOR

IN THE UNITED STATES, WORKPLACE injuries continue to be a persistent and costly problem. These injuries take their tolls in many ways, such as lost wages and financial strain on the injured worker, compromised productivity for the employer, and inability to find quality workers in high risk fields, just to name a few. Ironically, hospitals and other healthcare settings are the most prevalent for such injuries.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in their document Worker Safety in the Hospital, “U.S. hospitals recorded 6.8 work-related injuries and illnesses for every 100 full-time employees in 2011. That is almost twice the rate for private industry as a whole.” It outranks even the construction and manufacturing industries. Nearly half of those injuries – 48% – were caused by “overexertion or bodily reaction,
which includes motions such as lifting, bending, or reaching. These motions often relate to patient handling." In short, the necessity of having to move patients around during their course of care is causing significant injuries to healthcare workers.

In response to mitigate the costs in money and loss of quality healthcare workers due to these patient handling injuries, the advent of mechanical patient lift devices is on the rise, with promising results. One example cited by OSHA is Tampa General Hospital, which saw a reduction of patient handling injuries by 65% and associated costs by 92% after implementing mechanical lifting equipment.

Because of their success in reducing injuries to both patients and staff, patient lifting devices have become an integral part of the healthcare environment. For the laundries that service the healthcare industry, this has meant a subsequent increase of the fabric slings coming into their facilities. However, these slings present a unique set of challenges to both the laundry facility and the healthcare customer.

For the laundry, slings become a difficulty because their care directions do not conform to typical healthcare laundering processes used to produce hygienically clean textiles. Because their sole purpose is to safely support a patient’s entire weight, it is vital that there is no compromise of tensile strength and integrity. Thus, to reduce the wear on the sling fabric, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in their Patient Lift Safety Guide mandates that slings should be air dried only, never ironed, and no bleach should be used.

"Slings typically show up at the laundry with wash directions that include language like ‘machine wash, cold water only’, ‘hang to dry’ and ‘do not use bleach,’” said Chuck Rossmiller, Director of Laundry Programs for Medline Textiles. "This prevents the healthcare laundry from using their standard processes that they use with general healthcare linen. The issue for them is not an inability to follow the directions, but their responsibility to provide a properly cleaned healthcare textile that meets infection control requirements – the directions specifically prevent them from using temperatures and chemistry necessary to achieve disinfection. The flip side is that when you use higher temperatures or dry the slings in a dryer, the product typically can’t withstand those variables, so the product is damaged, and the laundry becomes liable for their replacement."

Adding to the pressure is the fact that many healthcare facilities utilize disposable slings. These are meant for use with one patient only during the course of their care and then discarded. These can find their way into the laundry where they are inadvertently laundered, then returned to the healthcare floor and reused. Because they are not meant for long term use, there is a risk of failure and injury to patients and healthcare staff.

To address these issues effectively, Rossmiller advises, “1. Communicate, 2. Communicate, 3. Communicate.”

Martie Moore, RN, MAOM, CPHQ, Chief Nursing Officer with Medline Industries, advises the same thing: “Clear communication and outlining expectations is the first step,” Moore says. “You have to think about it as a complete system and make sure everyone knows where they are in that system and their role.”

For example, slings have different colors depending on what they are used for, and if they are disposable or reusable, and those colors can vary between different manufacturing companies. Effective communication would mean ensuring that the healthcare staff knows which type of sling to use for specific situations and that disposable slings should be discarded instead of placed in laundry carts. It also means that the laundry would know how to identify disposable slings that did make it to the laundry and how to discard of them properly, or return them to the healthcare facility if
that is the established protocol in place. The laundry should also be apprised of any decisions to change the types of slings being used.

“Many times that step is missed,” says Moore. “A hospital will make the decision to go with all disposable and forget to tell the laundry.”

Rossmiller suggests going even a step further by bringing the laundry in on the decision making process: “Bring in a variety of products to test. Regardless of the wash instructions that are included with the product, let the laundry test the processing under normal healthcare laundering conditions. Work together to identify a product that meets the needs of the hospital as well as the needs of the laundry partner.”

On the clinician side, the decision making process on whether to go with reusable or disposable slings should take into account how the wash process will be effected and how well it can be assured that all staff involved with sling use will follow protocols. There are many factors to consider in terms of what types of slings to use. For examples, in an area of a hospital that sees many infectious patients, disposable slings are favorable. In terms of sustainability, reusable slings are more environmentally responsible and can be more cost effective. However, Rossmiller cautions: “Evaluate cost with the understanding that the laundering cost will be higher than a bath towel. The special handling required by the laundry creates real costs that the laundry needs to recoup.” With slings, as it is with all healthcare textiles, there is no right or wrong decision; each clinical facility must looks closely at its own needs and implement steps to make sure they are working with the laundry to ensure good results.

Moore recommends utilizing visual cues within the healthcare facility so that the right slings are being used for the right patients. She says such things as flowcharts that give the nursing staff an algorithm to follow will minimize the wrong slings making it to the laundry. On the laundry side, such visual communication posters can help laundry staff quickly identify which slings are reusable or disposable, and the correct way to either process or dispose of each. They can also be trained to look for rips and frayed seams that would render slings unusable.

One thing Moore also stresses is “Don’t assume because it’s been done right once, it’s set in stone. It can take seven times and seven different ways to get a point across.” This goes back to the idea of clear and constant communication. Once the systems are set in place and everyone is on the same page as to how slings are to be used and processed, it is still vital that those systems and their effectiveness are regularly evaluated and reiterated through continuing education. This will ensure that the procedures in place are consistently followed.

Patient lifts are a valuable tool within the healthcare setting. They have proved indispensable in improving safety for both patients and the staff who care for them. As such, their use will only continue to rise, meaning more slings within the system to be dealt with by the laundry. Communication and cooperation between the laundry and healthcare customer will help ensure processing the slings becomes a less stressful and more successful endeavor.

* Sling care tips courtesy of FDA. For more information, go to fda.gov and download their Patient Lifts.pdf.