



Put Your Best Foot Forward

ROBERT KRAVITZ

Health care facilities are always looking for ways to cut costs and operate more efficiently—not only because of the recession but also because the cost of health care has been a front-page issue in the United States for several months now. Health care

administrators will probably discover dozens of changes that will be or have already been implemented to help their facilities operate in a more cost-efficient manner.

One change that should not be ignored is located right under their feet. Maintaining floors in health care facilities is typically labor intensive, costly and disruptive to facility operations and can have a negative impact on the environment. Fortunately, there are ways health care administrators can minimize these costs and impacts while also maintaining their floors in a clean and healthy manner.

Looks do count

Never doubt the importance of floors in a facility, says David Frank, president of Knowledgworx®, president of the American Institute for Cleaning Sciences and a well-respected cleaning consultant. “Floors are [usually] the first thing people see when walking into a facility. They can make a first impression that often becomes a lasting impression of that business or organization.”

Frank’s comment is supported by a number of studies. For instance, when building visitors were asked, “what’s the first thing you look at when judging a facility’s cleanliness,” the most frequent response was floors. Retailers have discovered this as well. Another study—conducted by Progressive Grocer—found that as many as 91 percent of shoppers select a grocery store to shop in based on its appearance, typically starting with the floors.

The same is true of health care facilities. Clean, healthy and shiny floors breed confidence in a medical facility for patients and their families. Soiled, unkempt or under-maintained floors cause concern about the facility and the type of care it offers.

The maintenance of floors has taken on even greater importance in recent years. Mark Warner, cleaning consultant and product manager for disinfectants and sanitizers for chemical manufacturer Enviro-Solutions, says floors can play a critical role in minimizing or spreading disease in all kinds of facilities. This is because most people have as many as 50 direct and indirect contacts with floors every day.



“This happens whenever we drop something on the floor and then pick it up or tie our shoelaces, which may have come in contact with floors,” he says. “If the floor is contaminated, those germs and bacteria may now be on our hands, starting the chain of cross contamination.”

The appearance and care of floors in a health care facility can play a vital role in patient outcomes. They can diminish worry and help build assurance in that facility. A clean, healthy and well-maintained floor can also minimize the spread of disease, emphasizing the need to take care of medical facility floors. Again, the only problem is that floor care can be costly—but there are ways to combat these high costs.

Where does the money go?

Before addressing ways to reduce floor care costs, it is important to understand where the money goes when it comes to maintaining floors. According to a 2004 report by Green Seal®, a leading green-certification organization, more than

US\$1 billion is spent on floor care products such as strippers, polishes, sealers and cleaners each year in the United States. Although this may appear to be a large amount, it reflects only about 2 to 3 percent of the total amount spent on floor cleaning, refinishing and polishing.

The bulk of the costs involved with floor care are for labor. These amounts can range anywhere from 70 percent to more than 90 percent of the total expenses. At one time, when the cost of labor was less and there were fewer concerns about the environmental impact of floor care, it was common for medical care housekeeping professionals to strip and refinish floors two, three or more times per year. However, that frequency of refinishing cycles has been slowly scaled back over time.

Along with chemicals, the supplies, tools and equipment used for floor care—which can often provide years of satisfactory service—actually play a minor role when tabulating floor care costs. Some of the real

savings are found by just using some older technologies as well as more advanced floor care equipment.

Cutting costs by using old technology

Rick Silber, president of City Group—a janitorial distributorship based in Jessup, Md.—says that in his 20 years in the cleaning industry, “I have noticed that many facility managers decide when floors need to be stripped and refinished based on either a set floor care schedule or time of year. Medical centers [typically] divide their location into sections, with each section’s floors stripped and refinished based on a predetermined schedule.”

Instead of using scheduling methods based purely on the calendar, medical facility administrators should get more practical and refinish floors based on their appearance, says Silber. Additionally, the use of high-performance matting systems at all major entries and more frequent scrubbing, buffing or burnishing of floors—which are not as costly or labor intensive as stripping and

refinishing a floor—can have a significant impact on reducing refinishing cycles and related costs.

“An old system that still works well involves housekeeping technicians using a marker or similar device to place colored dots between coats [of finish]. Placing a red dot after the second coat, for instance, a blue dot after the third coat, yellow after the fourth and so on can help workers monitor how many coats of finish are still left on the floor over time. The goal, of course, is to never let the red or blue dots disappear.”

Advanced floor care equipment

The most significant savings in floor maintenance are usually derived through the type of floor care equipment used.

“The size and type of equipment selected can make a big difference in the cost of floor care because the right machine can help improve worker productivity, thereby cutting costs,” says Michael Schaffer, president of Tornado Industries, a leading manufacturer of floor care equipment. “In general, when cleaning areas smaller than 1,500 square feet, a standard floor machine—rotary or cylindrical—is suggested. But in areas larger than 1,500 square feet, a walk-behind and/or ride-on scrubber will pay dividends.”

The price of the equipment should also not deter administrators if they truly want to cut floor maintenance costs. Schaffer says that depending on floor size, frequency of use and labor charges, a walk-behind or ride-on automatic scrubber will typically pay for itself in less than a year and sometimes in just a few months.

“We have studies that show one person using a standard 16-inch buffer can clean 10,000 square feet of flooring in about 10 hours,” he says. “That same area can be cleaned in less than 30 minutes with a 24-inch walk-behind machine.”

Advancements in floor care equipment technology have also helped reduce costs. For instance, Schaffer explains that some auto-scrubbers have solenoids to control water flow. This avoids an old but common problem of water accidentally flowing if an operator leaves the valve open. Small battery-powered machines are available that deliver approximately two hours of run time, cleaning between 10,000 to 15,000 square feet before they need to be recharged—in addition to larger units that are capable of running entire shifts, cleaning in excess of 15,000 square feet an hour.

“Because they do not have to be continually plugged in and out from wall outlets, these increase worker productivity considerably,” he adds.

Schaffer also suggests that health care administrators consider an entirely different kind of floor care technology developed in Europe and now available in the United States. Called cylindrical brush technology, these machines use brushes instead of pads to clean, strip and scrub floors. The brushes are better able to reach deep into grout and porous floor areas, removing soiling with little or no added time or labor costs. Additionally, they adjust well to uneven floor surfaces and can clean rubber studded floors—which are becoming more common in medical locations because they can help prevent slips and falls.

What not to cut

Although the prices of chemicals used to clean, polish and maintain floors are relatively small when compared to the costs of labor involved in floor care, it is not unusual for administrators to select less-costly products in the hopes of saving money. Unfortunately, in many cases, this is not a wise course of action and may, in fact, have the opposite effect.

“Often, more expensive floor care chemicals are easier to apply and maintain, and they last longer,” says Schaffer. “With proper strategies in place, more expensive, higher-quality chemicals can postpone one or more refinishing cycles, so they more than pay for themselves in the long run.”

Health care managers may need to recognize one more factor when looking for ways to reduce their floor care costs. There may be some upfront expenditure to make changes but the long-term savings indicate there is a quick and ongoing return on the investment. **FMJ**

Floor safety

Statistics about slips, trips and falls

- Approximately one million people annually seek medical attention from emergency rooms due to slip and fall accidents (Product Safety Commission).
- More than 300,000 disabling injuries occur each year from slip and fall accidents (National Safety Council).
- Slip and fall accidents cost business owners millions of dollars a year in medical expenses, litigation costs and insurance rate increases (National Floor Safety Institute).
- Sixty percent of all fall-related deaths occur among people 65 and older.
- Falls are the number one cause of injury-related death for males 80 and older and for females 75 and older (National Safety Council).
- Fall-related medical expenses cost Americans more than US\$20 billion each year. Projections show these expenses will climb to more than US\$32 billion over the next 20 years (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- More than 17,000 people die annually as a result of falls alone (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- Slips, trips and falls account for 15 percent to 20 percent of all workers' compensation costs (Professional Retail Store Maintenance).

(Note: Statistics are one- to five-years old.)



Robert Kravitz is a former building service contractor, author of two books on the professional cleaning industry, and a frequent writer on cleaning and cleaning related articles for a variety of industries including health care.

Kravitz may be reached at info@alturasolutions.com.