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Green Machines: Health Care IT Can Improve Care, Hurt the Environment
by Colleen Egan, iHealthBeat Editor

It has been a slow process, but it finally has become widely accepted that IT can improve health care by preventing errors, reducing costs, and providing caregivers with comprehensive patient information and best practices. However, now that IT adoption is picking up and hospitals are trading clipboards and paper charts for PDAs and electronic health records, there's another problem: pollution.

While the frenetic pace of health care technology development is beneficial to IT innovation and patient care, improper disposal of electronics has serious implications for both the environment and human health. Health Care Without Harm, a coalition of 443 organizations in 52 countries, is working to promote "green purchasing" at hospitals and health systems by encouraging them to buy products that have less of an impact on the environment.

The Center for Environmental Health is collaborating with HCHW and the Computer Takeback Campaign on the issue of electronics in health care. Through its partnership with HCHW, the center is working directly with health care institutions and group purchasing organizations to provide purchasing assistance. The center and the Computer Takeback Campaign are working with electronic manufacturers to convince companies to produce more environmentally friendly electronics.

Buying Power

Sue Chiang, pollution prevention program director at the center, said the group is focusing on ways to improve institutional purchasing and help health care organizations "use their purchasing power to move the whole electronics market towards greener electronics."

For example, Kaiser Permanente has instituted an electronics recycling program. Chiang said Kaiser found that the storage of unused computers was costing it office space, as well as facility costs and unnecessary property taxes, so it contracted with Redemtech, a company that provides computer and electronics recycling. Kaiser asked Redemtech to sign the Electronics Recyclers Pledge of True Stewardship, an agreement that outlines e-waste recycling criteria.

Kaiser also has adopted Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool computer standards. EPEAT, which was released in July 2006, is a tool for institutional purchasers based on a national standard that evaluates electronics based on three levels of environmental performance.

According to Chiang, "Hospitals are seeing that by looking at the full life cycle of the materials they're using, they're creating better work environments for their employees and their patients."

She added that she thinks the green IT movement is a "great opportunity" for health care "to be able to move the whole electronics market" toward more environmentally friendly products.

Moving forward, Chiang said the center wants to get health care and other purchasers to "push for takeback programs, push for responsible recycling." Chiang said that there are other green IT efforts taking place internationally and that "the U.S. is behind, and we need to catch up" because "the rate of [electronics] obsolescence is really just getting unmanageable."

More on the Web:

[Center for Environmental Health](#)

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[EPEAT](#)

[Healthcare Without Harm](#)

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