

Hospitals cautioned against 'green' cleaners

Tom Blackwell, National Post

Published: Tuesday, March 31, 2009

The flood of new "green" cleaning products and disinfectants being used by Canadian hospitals are often ineffective in combatting infections that sicken thousands of patients a year, experts warn.

Concerned about the trend, the Quebec Health Ministry recently urged hospitals in the province to be sure that products marketed as ecologically safe will also keep surfaces clean - and patients protected.

In a letter issued this year, the ministry cited a survey indicating that more than 70% of Quebec health care facilities are using such green solutions.

With little regulation in the area, many manufacturers are marketing products that are simply diluted versions of more traditional chemicals, and have limited cleaning power, microbiologists and industry spokesmen say.

The hospitals typically dilute disinfectants even further, said Dr. Richard Marchand, a medical microbiologist at the Montreal Heart Institute.

"Because it's already half concentration, their normal dilution would now bring it to one in 20, and the product is inactive. And this happens often. There is no control," said Dr. Marchand, who advises the Quebec government on such issues.

"Some hospitals are having difficulty in controlling their infection rates because of the change in products."

The fear - not yet scientifically proven - is that under-powered green products are making hospitals more susceptible to pathogens like C. difficile and the Norwalk virus, infectious-disease specialists say.

"What that does is gives the infection-control professional, the people on the front-line in hospitals, a certain false sense of security," said Syed Sattar, a microbiologist at the University of Ottawa who specializes in disinfectants.

"They are all busy individuals and don't have either the time or deeper understanding to be able to look at the product label or brochure to decipher what exactly it is saying, or not saying."

It is estimated that "nosocomial" infection - microbes spread within a hospital - claim

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8,000 to 12,000 lives in Canada yearly, and hygiene within the facilities is considered a major factor.

Experts say the drive to make cleaners more environmentally friendly is an important one, noting that the gases released by products such as chlorine bleach can be harmful to both staff and patients.

More care and vigilance is needed, though, in ensuring the right green products are used, they argue.

The Groupement provincial de l'industrie du médicament - an association of Quebec-based pharmaceutical companies - raised the green-cleaner issue with Health Canada at a meeting in January, suggesting the department send its own warning to hospitals.

A spokesman for the department was not available for comment yesterday. Health Canada is planning beefed-up guidelines for antiseptic products, which would set out clearer requirements. But it only issued proposals for the new rules in November, and it is unclear when they might come into force.

"With Health Canada, everything is very slow," said Dr. Marchand, who also does work for a firm that makes medical disinfectants. "It takes an accident sometimes for them to act faster ... I would hope they will not need five or seven deaths to engage in this."

Meanwhile, the testing required for licensing of disinfectants now is often insufficient to prove their effectiveness in a real-world hospital situation, while many products are effective in killing bacteria, but useless against viruses, like Norwalk, said Prof. Sattar, who also works with disinfectant manufacturers.

Health Canada, though, is also planning to mandate more stringent testing, he said, which would put this country ahead of many others.

Cleaning products - as opposed to disinfectants - are essentially unregulated.

In its letter, the Quebec ministry warned hospitals to pay heed not only to the environmental attributes of products, but their ability to clean and disinfect. It urged facilities to test new products before using them widely.

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"products such as chlorine bleach can be harmful to both staff and patients." They CAN be harmful, which is a whole lot worse than 8,000 to 12,000 deaths I guess. Show me the proof that the old stuff is killing people! Show me.

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