CleanMed 2017 Session Proposal: Creative and Interactive Material Usage Project

Title: The Bigger Picture: Raising awareness of recyclable medical waste through art

Topic area: Greening the Operating Room

The bigger picture -- how something small can become a part of something very significant

Every day, the average person throws out a certain amount of trash, usually without a second thought. Discarding a small item may seem insignificant, but it is important to step back and recognize that these items accumulate. At the UW Hospital and Clinics in Madison, WI, members of the anesthesia team noticed that a commonly discarded item was being thrown into the trash when it could have been recycled. In the operating room, whenever we open sterile vials of injectable medications, we pop a small plastic cap off of these vials. For each procedure performed, we use at least 5 of these vials. At our institution we perform more than 30,000 anesthetic cases per year, which adds up to 150,000 plastic caps that get discarded into the landfill garbage, because they are too small to be successfully recycled in our common multi-stream recycling systems.

The plastic caps can be successfully recycled, if they are collected in larger quantities and put into containers of the same hard plastic material (e.g. laundry detergent jugs). The full containers can then be placed along with commingled recycling.

To raise provider awareness of the waste accumulation that results from these small objects, we initiated a vial cap collection program and have begun to create artwork with these objects. The interest in this was so great and there were many enthusiastic participants at several levels. Many operating room staff including anesthetists, nurses, surgical and anesthesia techs as well as physicians have contributed to this fun and interactive project.

Our specific proposal

We propose to bring our significant collection of vial caps to CleanMed2017 and create an interactive artwork. A team of creative participants from our institution led by the senior art coordinator from our hospital as well as physician anesthesiologists and a registered nurse will facilitate the creation of artwork and provide educational information on the project to conference participants.

Members of our team will be able to give on the spot informational presentations to visitors at the conference; including grass roots green practice growth in the operating room as well as the use of plastics in healthcare, and life cycle assessment of reusables vs. disposables. The goal is to create a vision in which plastics are seen as valuable materials to be conserved and not simply trash.

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