Healthcare facility managers are under constant pressure to tighten budgets and be as efficient as possible while meeting the hospital’s overall goal of providing excellent patient care. Despite these constraints, healthcare teams have made great strides in recent years to reduce energy and water consumption, and waste. One often-overlooked opportunity to further conserve, though, is in the hospital food service department. Even small changes in this area can have a positive impact on the environment and a hospital’s bottom line.

HEALING POWER OF FOOD
Hospitals are, first and foremost, places of healing and health promotion. Many healthcare organizations are now expanding this focus to include helping patients adopt healthy habits that keep them well over time. Diet changes are a critical component of promoting lifelong health and it begins during a patient’s hospital stay.

Poor diet is a major risk factor for obesity, high blood pressure, heart failure, stroke and kidney disease, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports. Promoting healthier food options in hospital cafeterias and on patient menus can help lessen the risk of these nutrition-related chronic diseases, which place a significant cost burden on individual healthcare organizations and the healthcare system as a whole. Patients that eat well, stay well longer. They also develop chronic conditions across their lifetimes at a much lower rate.

Putting healthcare facilities on a green diet saves money, the environment

By Hillary Bisnett & Janet Howard
Serving healthy food items — organic, local and/or sustainable — in healthcare organizations remains a challenge, though. The initial purchase is often cost-prohibitive compared with more processed, conventional foods. However, adopting smart purchasing practices, changing portion sizes and implementing waste reduction measures can lessen and even remove the budgetary impacts of serving fresher fare.

THE INCREDIBLE HEAP
Every year, 35 million tonnes of food waste is thrown away in the U.S. This wastefulness has a huge environmental impact. Not only does all the energy and water that went into food production go down the drain but rotting food waste also produces a tremendous amount of methane — a potent greenhouse gas (GHG) that is more harmful to the environment than carbon dioxide. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 20 per cent of the country’s GHG emissions are generated in landfills.

Hospitals contribute significantly to the problem of food waste. Between 10 and 15 per cent of a hospital’s waste stream is comprised of food.

The first step in reducing food waste is to examine the hospital’s purchasing practices and patient menus to make sure that as much of the food coming through the front door is being used. This is an effective way to determine where food waste is occurring and, subsequently, how it can be prevented.

Another cause of food waste generation is overproduction. Reducing portion sizes, cooking to order, providing room service and adjusting meals based on the volume of leftovers can further help trim waste.

The nature of a hospital setting is such that a certain amount of food waste is inevitable. Composting is not only an environmentally responsible but cost-effective measure to reduce the amount of scraps sent to landfill (after internal food waste has been curtailed).

To encourage composting in its cafeteria, UCLA has made the process as straightforward as possible for patrons.
Many food containers are compostable. Signs have been placed above every waste container throughout the facility to inform people about which bins hold compost and recyclables. In addition, UCLA uses the word “land-fill” instead of “garbage” to help remind patients, staff and guests that throwing something away actually means just moving it somewhere else.

**FULLY EQUIPPED**

The food service and healthcare industries are the most energy-intensive sectors in the economy. When combined, energy costs can reach staggering heights if not carefully monitored.

Food preparation makes up a large percentage of a food service’s energy bill — approximately 30 per cent, with refrigeration costs running between 13 and 18 per cent. Then there’s the water heater, exhaust hoods and HVAC systems, which together total the majority of energy used in a food service facility.

However, hospital kitchens, with their basement real estate and outdated equipment, are often the last place where energy efficiency investments are made despite that energy- and water-saving equipment pays for itself relatively quickly.

Today, there is a growing amount of commercial and institutional food service equipment available that carries the Energy Star label or is deemed highly efficient by research organizations like the Food Service Technology Center (FSTC) and the Consortium for Energy Efficiency (CEE). Energy Star-rated cooking equipment includes fryers, steam cookers and hot food holding cabinets. FSTC also has a diverse list of commercial cooking equipment that has undergone its efficiency testing. It includes combination ovens, convection ovens, fryers, large vat fryers, griddles, insulated holding cabinets and steam cookers.

Also known as “compartment steamers” or simply “steamers,” steam cookers designed with efficiency in mind can save significant amounts of electricity, gas and water. Convection ovens also offer great energy savings along with big rebates, which sometimes can help cover a good portion of the purchase cost.

On the water front, Energy Star’s sister program, WaterSense, has created standards for pre-rinse spray valves, which can account for nearly one-third of the water used in a typical commercial kitchen. The maximum flow rate for WaterSense-labelled models is 1.28 gallons per minute (gpm) — 0.32 gpm less than the federal standard. Replacing just one pre-rinse spray valve with an eco-friendly model can save more than 7,000 gallons of water per year, which is equivalent to the amount of water needed to wash approximately 5,000 racks of dishes.

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**CHURNING OUT ANTIBIOTIC-FREE MEAT**

The University of Vermont (UVM) Medical Center in Burlington, Vt., is striving to have the greenest healthcare food service in the U.S. In addition to introducing room service to reduce food waste and growing food on-site in its healing garden, the academic hospital is serving patients, visitors and staff organic, locally sourced ingredients, including antibiotic-free meat.

UVM Medical Center’s decision to alter its food purchasing choices was based on a growing body of evidence that has linked the routine overuse of antibiotics in meat and livestock to the increase in drug-resistant bacteria, which is a threat to the long-term efficacy of antibiotics for human use.

Since introducing its long-term antibiotics reduction plan in 2010, UVM Medical Center’s purchase of antibiotic-free meat has grown from 35 per cent to well over 50 per cent today. It has come at a price, though. Natural meat is more expensive than meat from animals raised on antibiotic-laden feed. But UVM Medical Center considers the cash injection well worth it when the high cost of treating MRSA (methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) infection in patients is factored in. Still, the hospital is always looking at ways to cut costs, and has since become creative with its beef purchases, using less expensive cuts like flank, top round and ground beef.