

Holy Sheets!

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By David Johnson

Hospitals have used cotton linens since the early 1900s. Crisp, white sheets touch all patients and epitomize healing. "Hospital corners" describe the proper way to make a bed. Image and tradition have combined to make cotton linens the standard of care for America's hospitals.

Myth masks reality. Cotton linens breed bacteria. Lint from cotton linens goes airborne, enters open wounds and spreads infection. Friction from wet linens irritates patients' skin and compromises healing.

Scientists measure bacterial intensity by counting "colony forming units" (CFUs). CFUs represent the number of viable bacteria or fungal cells. A clean hospital bed sheet starts with 12 CFUs and skyrockets to 1200 after a day's use. Yuck!

Seeking a better way, Cone Health in Greensboro, North Carolina is working with a local textile manufacturer years to develop and assess synthetic therapeutic linens. At a recent Health Management Academy forum, GE Nursing Fellow Annette Osborne detailed how therapeutics outperform cotton linens:

- Cleaner: virtually eliminate airborne particles and bacteria formation
- Drier: advanced wicking properties means evaporation occurs on fabrics, not patients' skin
- Smoother: silk-like structure minimizes friction and skin abrasion
- Lower Total Cost: cost twice as much as cotton linens, but last three-four times longer
- Environmentally Friendly: require less energy to launder

Most importantly, therapeutic sheets advance healing. Three double-blind clinical trials demonstrate that therapeutics reduce the incidence of pressure ulcers dramatically and lower length of stay. Anecdotal evidence suggests enhanced outcomes for burn patients and reduced levels of hospital-acquired infections.

Moreover, patients love the product. They sleep better, heal faster and buy therapeutic linens for home use. Cone shifted to clear discharge bags and increased observation to discourage theft.

It's taken five years, focused nursing leadership and strong CEO support for Cone to establish therapeutic linens as their standard of care. Sentara Health will become the second system to adopt the product. The rest of American health-care lags.



Even "old school" boxer Rocky Balboa switched from cotton sweats to modern workout clothes as he moved from Rocky I in 1976 through Rocky VI in 2006. Like therapeutic linens, current training gear is lighter, stronger, drier, more comfortable, longer-lasting and better-looking.

If Rocky Can Do It...

Not all change is complicated. Study time is over. Therapeutic linens are the type of delivery innovation that health systems should embrace. It's time to accelerate their adoption.