Saint Mary’s Health Care

Saint Mary’s Health Care believed electronic inventory management in the OR was the way to go. In practice, though, the hospital found it to be too expensive and prone to inaccuracy. Disenchanted, it replaced its electronic system with Co/Struc lockers from Herman Miller Healthcare. The compact, mobile lockers have helped the hospital cut time and money from inventory management.
Installing an electronic inventory management system to keep its operating rooms stocked sounded like a can’t-miss idea to Saint Mary’s Health Care.

The Grand Rapids, Michigan, hospital outfitted each of its operating rooms with a computer-equipped storage cabinet that provided access to an inventory database. Whenever nurses removed an item, they simply keyed it into the computer, keeping inventory updated.

At least in theory. In practice, OR personnel found that dealing with inventory management wasn’t a top priority during surgical procedures. Over time, accuracy became increasingly spotty, causing hospital administrators to question whether the electronic units were worth purchasing outright after their lease expired.

“When there’s a need in the OR, it’s generally urgent,” says Ann Dehen, inventory control coordinator for Saint Mary’s. “Staff didn’t always have time to log in and tell the system what was being removed or restocked.”

“We concluded that these basically amounted to pretty expensive supply cabinets,” adds Steve Palmreuter, who oversees efforts to implement lean processes at Saint Mary’s. “So we began looking for a more affordable way to manage inventory.”

RESTOCKED AND READY

After investigating alternatives, Saint Mary’s opted to go with Co/Struc lockers from Herman Miller Healthcare. The hospital uses 13 lockers for basic supplies—one in each operating room—and keeps another six in reserve. After every two or three cases, the depleted locker is rolled out and a fresh one is rolled in, fully stocked and ready to go.

The mobility alone is a plus. The lightweight Co/Struc lockers simply roll about on casters, whereas the electronic system Saint Mary’s had been using relied on bulky metal cabinets that were impractical to move.

The Co/Struc lockers are preferable because of how they use space, too. Nearly six-feet tall on a footprint not quite two square feet, the lockers make efficient use of vertical space,
while taking up hardly any floor space. Tambour doors keep supplies covered and clean, but slide up into the locker rather than pull open into the room, further helping to reduce congestion in the surgical suite.

Since most surgical procedures use the same stock of basic supplies—gloves, gowns, sutures, and so forth—each locker is configured the same, with two 6-inch-high drawers, four 3-inch-high drawers, and four shelves. If needs change, Saint Mary's can simply reconfigure and reuse the interior components—no need for tools; just switch things around.

"The ability to customize the interior was a huge factor in why Saint Mary's chose the Co/Struc lockers," says Linda Gommesen, healthcare account manager with WorkSquared, a Herman Miller dealer in Grand Rapids.

Aside from the similarly equipped lockers, Saint Mary's also has another seven Co/Struc lockers that are specially configured and stocked for specific cases like eye procedures and plastic surgery.

SAVE TIME, SAVE MONEY

With Co/Struc, turnover time between procedures is dramatically less than before because resupplying is as simple as rolling in a freshly stocked locker.

"It's very costly to have an operating room sitting idle when patients, physicians, and OR staff are waiting," Palmreuter says. "Quick changeovers are as important in the OR as they are on the manufacturing line."

Restocking time is less than five minutes per locker, down from about 30 minutes when Saint Mary's first began using Co/Struc. The hospital attributes the improvement mostly to reorganizing central supply in a way that complements the locker layout.

"There used to be a lot of walking back and forth between the lockers and the supply shelves," Dehen says. "Now, we've arranged things so we just start at one end of the supply area and roll the locker to the other, picking up what we need as we go."
As much as Saint Mary's appreciates the mobility, space utilization, and time savings stemming from the Co/Struc lockers, there's an even bigger bonus that goes straight to the bottom line.

When Saint Mary's shelved its electronic inventory system, staffers pulled out a substantial amount of excess supplies, much of which had expired and needed to be tossed. The smaller, more frequently replenished Co/Struc lockers improve just-in-time supply management and ensure that hardly anything goes to waste.

"The lockers provide us with better management of our supplies," Dehen says. "We've been able to reduce our on-hand inventory significantly."