

SSM Health Care bans plastic water bottles in hospitals; vending machine plastic bottle bans on tap

Many healthcare organizations have been waking up to the irony that one of the healthiest things in the world for humans to consume is also packaged in material that is rapidly choking landfills and destroying the environment.

With that in mind, Premier member St. Louis-based SSM Health Care, one of the nation's largest Catholic healthcare systems, made a recent bold decision to ban bottled water from its 20 acute care hospitals in Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin and Oklahoma.

SSM Health Care said it made the decision to ban the plastic containers because of the harmful environmental impact of making, transporting and disposing of the bottles. The system purchases more than half a million bottles of water annually for employees, patients and guests. The move follows SSM Health Care's decision more than 18 years ago to eliminate Styrofoam cups, although the cups have returned on a limited basis because the materials and processes used to make them are now more environmentally friendly.



The bottled water ban is just the latest in a series of sweeping environmental efforts implemented by SSM Health Care, a 2002 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner. Just a year ago, the system recycled more than 6.6 million pounds of materials. Four years ago, SSM Health Care became the largest health system in the nation to go tobacco free inside and out to create healthier environments for patients. Since then, hundreds of hospitals and other health facilities across the nation have followed suit.

According to Sister Mary Jean Ryan, FSM, president and CEO, SSM is among the first healthcare organizations in the nation to eliminate bottled water usage at its facilities. In eliminating bottled water, SSM joins a number of cities that have made a similar commitment, including San Francisco, Minneapolis, Seattle and Salt Lake City. A growing number of restaurants are also eliminating bottled water.

The bottle ban met mostly with wide acclaim and praise from both inside and outside the healthcare system.

"I think SSM is an incredibly progressive healthcare system. To be willing to step out and do difficult things like banning tobacco and now banning plastic bottles tells me there are still courageous organizations out there, which is rare in our culture today," said Bhavin Shah, operations advisor consultant for Premier. "Sister Ryan is setting a fabulous

example for the rest of the country's hospitals. It takes a bold person to take a step forward to implement ideas and hopefully the rest should follow their lead.”

Ryan said the bottled water ban supports the policies of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, which sponsors SSM Health Care, to “respect, appreciate and live in harmony with creation and direct our actions to preserve the earth.” She added that SSM wanted to implement a policy that not only had a huge positive impact, but made a statement as well. “We focused on bottled water because it constitutes the greatest amount of any kind of liquid we have in plastic, and so we thought if we are going to make any kind of significant impact, that’s where it’s going to be,” she said.

“Eliminating bottled water is a contribution we can make as a system to protect our fragile environment,” Ryan added. “One of the biggest problems with bottled water is that it takes fossil fuels to produce the bottles, and then more fossil fuels are used to transport the bottles to their final destination.”

According to the Container Recycling Institute, it takes 15 million barrels of oil per year to make all of the plastic water bottles in America. Only one out of five bottles is actually recycled, and the rest end up in the garbage and in landfills and can take up to 1,000 years to biodegrade.

Ongoing ‘green’ efforts

Inspired to act by her religious congregation's commitment to non-violence and a photo she had seen of a polluted harbor, Ryan implemented a system wide policy in 1990 requiring every SSM facility to establish a “Preservation of the Earth” (POE) committee. “We have learned that we cannot apply the most advanced medical technology to cure people’s illnesses and then send them home to heal in an unhealthy environment,” she said. “POE committees raise awareness about what we can do personally and what our organization can do to tread lightly on our earth.” POEs provide earth-friendly education and encouragement to employees to follow the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

Ryan said SSM takes recycling very seriously. In fact, SSM recycles millions of pounds of materials, including paper, cardboard, aluminum/steel cans, glass and plastic, every



SISTER MARY JEAN RYAN

year. Its 2007 recycling effort resulted in the conservation of 56,156 trees, 1.2 million gallons of oil, and nearly 23 million gallons of water.

Staff acceptance

SSM facilities will no longer provide bottled water for meetings and will not sell it in cafeterias, in vending machines and other locations. Patients and guests will still be able to get water in hospital cafeterias using recycled paper cups, and employees are encouraged to use reusable water bottles or cups.

As with most sweeping changes, the bottle ban did create a slight ripple among some employees. “Initially, there was kind of a mixed review on it,” said Ryan. “Some believe we should not have done it because water is so important and healthy. I don’t disagree with that. But the fact of the matter is people can still bring it from home. We’re just not going to provide it in the quantities we’ve been providing it in the past.”

Some staff expressed concerns anonymously on SSM’s web site blog that patients and their families would be most affected; some questioned why the system would ban bottled water, yet continue allowing the sale of carbonated soft drinks in vending machines. Chris Sutton, a system spokesperson, said the bottled water ban is the first in a series of steps, and by August 2008, all seven St. Louis area hospitals will eliminate selling bottled beverages of any kind in their vending machines. Sutton said he expects other SSM hospitals to follow suit.

Others pleaded with the system to install better water filtration systems at hospitals so staff and patients could drink tap water, which some have complained tastes bad. Sutton said SSM hospitals periodically test their water quality and to date, there have been no reports of water quality issues. Sutton added that patients and families are still allowed to bring their own bottled water to the hospital.

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