

GREEN health

Hospital a state leader in environmental practices

By **JONDI GUMZ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

When it comes to recycling and reusing, Dominican Hospital is a winner. *Hospitals Dominican 2-18-07 Hospital*

In fact, the state has singled out the 369-bed hospital as an innovative and environmentally conscientious business for 10 straight years.

Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, 56, who joined the hospital as ecology coordinator in 1996, has a simple explanation for its success.

"Caring for Earth is part of our values, and those of the Adrian Dominican Sisters with whom I live and work," she said.

Dominican is one of six hospitals affiliated with Catholic Health West to be honored for exemplary practices this year by the California Integrated Waste Management Board. None of the other hospitals has a track record as long as the one at Dominican, a major local employer with a staff of 1,700.

"This is Santa Cruz," said Leciejewski, referring to county's reputation as a place where environmental concerns are a priority. "People are interested. They want to participate."

Her leadership is just as important.

"If we don't have a healthy planet, we won't have healthy human beings," she said.

Dressed in a stylish pantsuit complementing her graying hair, she looked and sounded like a teacher. She taught French before she earned a master's degree in ecology from the University of Illinois at Springfield. Then she came west at the invitation of Sister Julie Hyer, then the president at Dominican Hospital.

Pat McVeigh, a nurse, and Carol George, then in computer services, had realized the hospital was generating a lot of waste, which led to the creation of a full-time ecology coordinator. Leciejewski took on that mission.

The results so far include:

- Recycling 50 tons of paper and 78 tons of cardboard annually, keeping the materials out of landfills.
- Switching to intravenous fluid bags made of copolymers and eliminating polyvinyl chloride and DEHP, both chemical toxins.
- Collecting used needles in large plastic containers that are reused 500 times before disposal.
- Using a large container rather than small ones to collect bodily fluids in the operating room.
- Sending surplus medical supplies and equipment overseas for use by the Flying Doctors charitable organization.
- Recycling electronic waste without sending it to dump sites overseas.
- Creating a center to collect materials that can be reused.
- Offering old furniture to others in need.
- Establishing a garden to grow vegetables for the cafeteria and installing a worm compost bin as a substitute for chemical fertilizer.

See **GREEN** on **PAGE D6**

Other local winners

ETR Associates, Scotts Valley: 2004, 2005, 2006
Safeway Inc. (has six stores in county): 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006
Santa Cruz Seaside Co.: 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006
Target (has a store in Watsonville): 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006
Source: California Integrated Waste Management Board



ABOVE: Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, surrounded by recycling bins, leads the effort to keep Dominican Hospital environmentally responsible.

RIGHT: Leciejewski shows off containers used to dispose of used needles. A vendor, Bio-Systems, takes the containers to an approved medical waste station, then washes and sanitizes the containers, which can be reused 500 times. With this system, the 369-bed hospital no longer needs individual boxes to properly dispose of some 13,677 needles a year.



Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel photos

Green

Continued from Page D1

■ Replacing Styrofoam coffee cups with reusable ones.

The hospital is not only reusing more but also finding ways to reduce waste by changes in packaging. For example, the hospital no longer has to dispose of 13,677 boxes designed to hold a single needle and another 729 cardboard box packages. One study showed a 250-bed hospital would cut medical waste by 13 tons a year by switching from single-use to reusable containers.

Leciejewski is fond of pointing out that reducing waste is a team effort.

She quotes Indian activist Mohandas Gandhi, "Whatever you do may seem insignificant to you, but it is most important that you do it."

At Dominican, the team is the Ecology Task Force, which meets quarterly to review progress made and plan the next effort.

"You have to find a champion in each area, someone who believes in recycling," said Denise Fritsch, food and nutrition manager. "It helps motivate the rest of the staff."

Executive chef Deane Bussiere is one of those champions. He carves out time in the day for cooks to rinse out aluminum and tin cans for recycling so they don't end up in the trash.

Fritsch is serving fair trade coffee in the cafeteria to benefit small coffee growers.

"It costs a little bit more, but it's worth it," she said.

Hospitals affiliated with Catholic Healthcare West are following Dominican's lead, she added, citing a survey that

found all of them recycling grease, paper and cardboard.

Another of Dominican's champions is Michael Raciti, food storeroom supervisor, who pushed for creation of the organic garden three years ago. Strawberries, lettuce and carrots are grown in the two plots — about 4,000 square feet — replacing ornamental landscaping. Three dozen volunteers help mulch and weed.

Radiology director Rich Crescini pitched in, going on the radio to beg for a small greenhouse. Peter Fryn donated one that was installed a month ago.

Dominican is a member of Hospitals for a Healthy Environment and Health Care Without Harm, two organizations that are asking vendors and manufacturers to retool their products to reduce waste.

Dominican also is a member of the California Climate Action Registry, which was formed in 2000 by the Legislature to report greenhouse gas emissions and has grown to more than 200 members.

"When you measure it, you can manage it," said Leciejewski. "Collecting data is a challenge. You have to get a process in place so it's painless."

It is not easy to change long-established practices. The idea of eliminating thermometers with mercury, a powerful poison, and replacing them with digital models was broached in 2001. The switch took years.

Still, Leciejewski persists no matter what challenges arise.

"It's for a worthy cause," she said.

Contact Jondi Gumz at jgumz@santacruzsentinel.com.