

Cancelling Unused Magazine Subscriptions

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre



Initiative Goal: Reduce paper waste

Benefits

Environmental: less paper and plastic packaging is being used on unread magazine subscriptions.

Financial: the hospital now has less paper to recycle and saves money in waste hauler costs.

Administration: less time is devoted by mail services and office administration to deliver and dispose of unread and unwanted publications.

The Issue

Tammy Lilien, Special Projects Coordinator for the Palliative Care Consult Team at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, noticed a large volume of magazines going directly from physicians' mailboxes into the recycling bin. *"Sometimes the magazines were still in their plastic wrap, and that was a giveaway that they weren't being read,"* said Lilien.

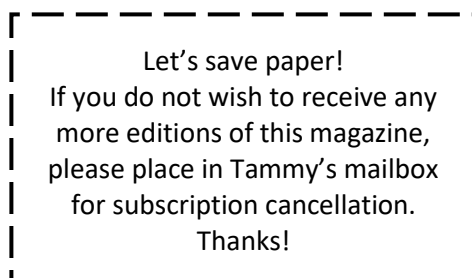
Physicians are often automatically subscribed to a number of free medical publications as a result of writing exams, going through medical school, etc. These include medical journals, pharmaceutical catalogues, medical magazines, and more. Unfortunately, doctors often do not have time for reading these publications or forwarding them to their new working address once they change positions. The result is an enormous pile of unwanted paper with nowhere to go but the recycling bin.



Tammy Lilien
Palliative Care Consult Team
Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre

Sustainability Strategy Implemented

In June 2013, hoping to curb the number of unread publications going to waste, Lilien printed up small notes like the one shown below and attached one to each incoming magazine.



A few magazines with the tag started trickling in to her mailbox, so she began calling the companies to cancel the subscriptions on behalf of the physicians. Three and a half years later, she is still canceling subscriptions.

Implementation process

This small, simple initiative is easy to implement and easy for physicians to do. Lilien makes the cards in Microsoft Word, prints them herself, and the administrative team that sorts the mail attaches them with a paperclip to incoming mail. If physicians wish to cancel the subscription, they simply place the magazine in Lilien's mailbox, located on the same mailbox cluster as their own. It's an easy switch to make from tossing it in the bin.

Tracking Progress

Since June 2013, Lilien has cancelled 90 magazine subscriptions from her team of 10 physicians at Sunnybrook. Due to differences in magazine paper quality and length, it would be difficult to estimate the weight in paper that has stopped going to waste; however, 90 magazines per month times 12 months of the year is undoubtedly a significant reduction in paper and the resources that go in to printing, distribution and disposal.

"I came to appreciate that not only are we helping the environment by using less paper, but it's less administration time, less time for the mail person because there's less mail to deliver, and less recycling generated. The waste hauler charges the hospital based on weight of the waste, so we're helping reduce costs there too," Lilien said.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The biggest barrier Lilien faces is reluctance by the magazine companies to cancel the subscriptions. Sometimes they will not accept her call on a physician's behalf. As a workaround, she writes up a quick cancellation request email and sends it to the physician, includes the magazine company's email address, and asks the physician to forward it. Most of the time, this is enough.

"Minimize impact to the physicians, maximize impact on the system," Lilien says.

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Making it as easy as possible for physicians has played a huge role in the success of the initiative. *"Tammy's green initiative has virtually eliminated unwanted periodicals arriving in our mailboxes. We spend less time sorting through mail, which saves valuable time each day. Based on our experience I would recommend this as a strategy other teams could use to generate less waste."* - Dr. Anita Chakraborty, co-head of the Palliative Care Consult Team

Next Steps

Lilien's team is made up of only 15-20 people in an organization of over 10,000. While she continues to cancel subscriptions for her own group as requested, she is not in a position where she has the time or resources to affect change for other teams. In addition, some areas of the hospital – such as those with waiting rooms – do want magazine subscriptions, so this initiative might not be applicable to all departments.

To expand this initiative, the Coalition has put together a Magazine Subscription Cancellation Mini-Toolkit, with a template for the printable tags, a cancellation tracking form, and pre-drafted emails. The mini-toolkit is available online at www.greenhealthcare.ca/magazines. Additionally, Sunnybrook's Manager of Energy and Sustainability, Laura Berndt, hopes to promote the idea to office administration staff at upcoming waste reduction workshops.

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre is an academic health sciences centre in Toronto, ON. With 1.2 million patient visits each year, and a staff of approximately 10,000 full- and part-time employees, Sunnybrook has established itself across three campuses and is home to Canada's largest trauma centre.

Contact Information

Samantha Putos, Sustainable Health Care Programs
Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care
samantha@greenhealthcare.ca
<http://greenhealthcare.ca/magazines>

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