Protecting the environment and running an efficient OR aren’t mutually exclusive at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU), Portland, thanks to the commitment of a surgeon, an OR nurse leader, and the OR nursing staff.

“Just because we are dealing with life and death issues doesn’t mean that we have to stop thinking about the environment,” says Juli-ana E. Hansen, MD, FACS, chief of plastic surgery and associate professor of surgery.

In fact, paying attention to the environment pays off financially. At the American College of Surgeons (ACS) 2008 Clinical Congress in October, Dr Hansen reported the university’s sustainability programs recycled nearly 1,100 tons of solid waste in 2007 and saved more than $85,000 in waste management fees. Surgeons and OR staff recycle about 300 pounds of uncontaminated paper and plastic products from the university’s 21 inpatient ORs each day.

Recycling has also had a positive effect on staff satisfaction, according to Melody Montgomery, RN, MBA, division director, perioperative services.

**How it’s done**

“A staff nurse has to spearhead the effort,” says Montgomery. “It can’t be a management mandate.” Staff nurses like Dana Peterson, RN, and Rayna Barrett, RN, have been instrumental to the success of OHSU’s recycling program.

“Dana started it, and Rayna has been the high octane fuel to keep it going,” says Montgomery. She adds that support from top management is key so staff believe they can “legitimately spend time on recycling. It takes both—staff and management—to have a successful program that can sustain the needed energy and focus.”

Montgomery acknowledges that not all staff buy into the recycling program, particularly in the largest OR suite. That’s partly due to the challenge of the ever-changing faces—residents, new physicians, and temporary staff—in an academic medical center.

**Focus the effort**

“We now plan on putting the recycling information in our orientation packets,” says Montgomery, who advises managers to focus recycling efforts on large, fre-
quently used items, such as wrapping on surgical packs and plastic bottles. “We were trying to do it all, and we were biting off more than we could chew,” she says. Currently 3 of OHSU’s 5 OR suites recycle.

Each OR room has 2 clearly labeled bins: 1 for paper and 1 for plastic. Green bags are used to clearly identify trash for recycling.

Ongoing education is key. “It takes a lot of ongoing effort to keep people onboard with recycling efforts,” says Dr Hansen.

Flyers posted in key areas remind staff to recycle. OHSU’s “Green Team” provides quarterly flyers, e-mails, and in-services to the OR staff. The communications update staff on recycling issues, notify them of any contamination events, and let them know of any changes in the program.

Finding surgeon advocates

Dr Hansen’s interest in sustainability dates back to 2000. “I got disgusted seeing how much waste was being created in the OR.” After starting a program that “fizzled,” she was happy to see the OHSU Green Team form in 2004.

“Part of their job is to make things happen,” Dr Hansen says. “They have established this force that is getting stronger and more involved by the year.”

Now Dr Hansen is encouraging her colleagues to pay more attention to the environment.

“Other surgeons aren’t that interested,” she admits, noting that the ACS abstract generated less attention than she had hoped. “But I’m going to keep going and keep working on surgeons.” That includes getting her abstract published.

One way to ensure surgeon interest is to make recycling part of the culture. “Surgeons will do what the environment mandates they are to do,” says Dr Hansen, who acknowledges that nurses are key to any recycling program.

However, Dr Hansen says nurses shouldn’t give up on surgeons as environmental partners.

“Who has the biggest and loudest voice in the OR?” she asks rhetorically. “Surgeons can be advocates for these programs.”

—Cynthia Saver, RN, MS

Cynthia Saver is a freelance writer in Columbia, Maryland.
Green by the numbers at OHSU ORs

“The money saved from green efforts is impressive,” says Dr Hansen. Here are some ways OHSU has been able to care for the environment in the surgical suite:

• Light-emitting diode (LED lights and low-mercury lamps): Saves about $40,000 in energy costs a year.
• Cleaning supplies that meet or exceed Green Seal standards (www.greenseal.org).
• Green Tag renewable energy certificates: Decrease carbon output by 265,000 pounds each month.

Green Tags are now called BEF Carbon Offsets. Bonneville Environmental Foundation, a national, nonprofit organization, sells offsets to help replace polluting sources of electricity with renewable sources of energy.

See www.b-e-f.org/offsets for more information.