The term “flash sterilization” is going away. The new term is “immediate use sterilization.” The new term better describes the process employed to steam sterilize items intended to be used immediately and not stored, say those who have worked on a joint position statement on immediate use sterilization. The statement, developed by 13 professional societies and agencies, is expected to be issued soon.

“We all agreed that the term ‘flash sterilization’ is antiquated and was contributing to confusion,” says Ramona Conner, MSN, RN, CNOR, manager of standards and recommended practices for AORN, which endorsed the statement in October.

The statement notes that immediate use sterilization is safe and efficacious as long as users understand the principles of steam sterilization, make sure their personnel are well educated, and are well informed about manufacturers’ requirements for sterilizing particular items.

The statement addresses elements required to perform immediate use sterilization.

“It emphasizes the key steps of cleaning, decontamination, and rinsing prior to sterilization and emphasizes the importance of aseptic transfer of the sterilized product from the sterilizer to the point of use,” Conner says. Shortcuts, particularly in cleaning, are what have given flash sterilization a bad name.

**Guidelines unchanged**

The joint statement doesn’t change current steam sterilization guidelines of either the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) or AORN, she notes. AORN will update its sterilization recommended practices in 2011 to reflect the term “immediate use.”

Other organizations that had endorsed the statement by press time are the ASC Quality Collaboration, the International Association of Healthcare Central Service Materiel Management (IAHCSMM), and the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care. The statement was awaiting a vote of the AAMI standards board, having been approved by AAMI’s hospital steam sterilization working group in November. The final document will become an interpretive statement to AAMI’s ST79 steam sterilization standard.

**Looking at the whole process**

“The Joint Commission has given us verbal acknowledgment that they will recognize the statement, as has the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS),” says Conner. (Federal agencies and accrediting bodies don’t endorse statements; they recognize them, she explains.)

Conner says she thinks the discussions have already helped surveyors
better understand immediate use sterilization and the key areas they need
to look for in a survey, “specifically looking at the whole process rather than
just the number of cycles that are run.”

Other organizations involved are the American Dental Association, the
American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery, the Association for
Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, the Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Association, and the American
Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities.