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Md. hospitals, care facilities working to cut their use of toxic pesticides

By Kelly Brewington
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Johns Hopkins Hospital, the University of Maryland Medical Center and nearly a dozen other health care and retirement facilities are working to eliminate toxic pesticides from their pest control efforts, a move that environmental advocates say is the first like it in the country.

The Maryland Pesticide Network launched the effort in 2005 after conducting a survey of pest-control products and practices in state health care facilities statewide.

While the chemicals are legal and approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, advocates point to studies showing that 25 of the most commonly used pesticides are harmful to animals and marine life or have links to cancer, birth defects and neurological problems.

The Maryland Pesticide Network and a national group, Beyond Pesticides, released a report yesterday describing the most commonly used pesticides and how hospitals are working to avoid them.

For instance, ant-killing baits that contain boric acid and rodent-fighting powder with diphacinone both have been found to be toxic to birds, fish and humans, the report said.

Instead of using such baits and sprays, advocates recommend sealing wall cracks and repairing window screens at the first sign of rodents or bugs. If a more rigorous approach is needed, powders, soils and sprays made with organic materials should be tried. Pesticides should be used as a last resort, they say.

Johns Hopkins Hospital first employed the seven-step strategy, known as integrated pest management, about 18 months ago and has since seen a 60 percent decrease in pest sightings, said Chris Seale, the hospital's environmental services director. Seale said the new plan helps him do the two essential parts of his job: manage the pest population and keep hospital patients, staff and visitors safe.

"The cost is slightly higher but completely reasonable, especially considering the outcome," he said.

Seale worked with the Maryland Pesticide Network to devise a pest-fighting plan and then challenged five vendors to meet his needs at the best price.

Key to reducing reliance on pesticides is educating hospitals and vendors, said Ruth Berlin, executive director of the network. "We found that a lot of the health care facilities didn't know what they were using," she said.

Most hospitals contract their pest-fighting activities to vendors, who are not always aware of the latest science on pesticides, she said. As more health facilities demand "green" techniques, she hopes vendors will provide more nontoxic options.

The network began confronting the use of pesticides more than a decade ago and pushed in 1999 to get a state law passed limiting the use of pesticides in and around Maryland public schools.

"We started our work with the most vulnerable populations," Berlin said. "And hospitals fit with that."

Other facilities taking part include Erickson Retirement Communities, Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital, Springfield Hospital Center, Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, Broadmead Retirement Community, Copper Ridge, Harbor Hospital, the Forbush School, Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital, Mercy Medical Center and Sinai Hospital.