

Minimizing Plastic Straw Use The Wesley Hospital - UnitingCare Queensland, Australia

GGHH Agenda Goals

- Procurement
- Waste

Hospital Goal

To reduce single use plastics by minimizing straw use and switching to an alternative paper product where possible.

Progress Achieved

- \$3,420 cost savings (68% reduction)
- Avoided the use of 422,000 straws (84% reduction)
- Reduced waste to landfill by 177 kilograms

The Issue

Up until November 2018, The Wesley was using 41,500 disposable plastic straws per month. The hospital’s high straw usage was underpinned by an inherently wasteful process: straws were provided, by default, with every cold beverage—up to six per day for some patients.

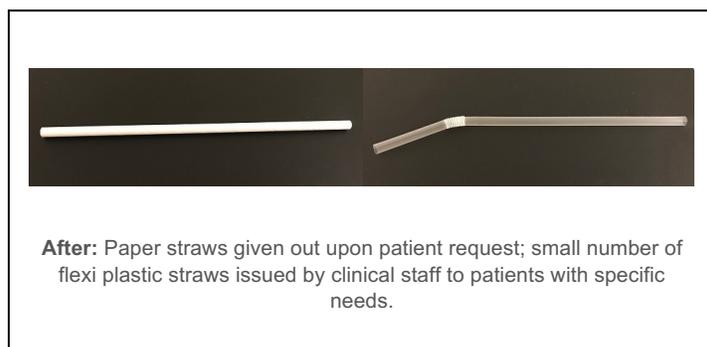
While this represented a relatively small amount of waste (17kg/month) and financial cost to the hospital (\$416/month), the environmental impact of plastic straws has become highly visible and well understood in recent years. The hospital’s commitment to waste minimisation, combined with internal pressure from staff, made this a priority issue to address.



Plastic straws cannot be easily recycled and do not biodegrade; instead, they are sent to landfill, where they take up to 200 years to break down. Furthermore, some will inevitably escape into the ocean, where they can be fatally ingested by wildlife such as turtles and seabirds.

Sustainability Strategy Implemented

The Wesley identified a win-win opportunity to improve its process and reduce its environmental footprint through a combined straw reduction and paper switch initiative. Both the process and products were changed; now, straight paper straws are given to patients only upon request during the beverage rounds. A small number of flexible Biopak plastic straws are issued by clinical staff to patients with specific needs.



Implementation process

The initiative was led by Hospitality Services Manager, Luke Hoskin, who worked with suppliers and undertook product testing to identify the best paper and flexi bioplastic alternatives. In particular, the quality of paper products varied greatly; some degraded very quickly when placed in liquid, while the most superior option maintained integrity for three days. Once suitable replacement products were identified, Luke facilitated endorsement of The Wesley’s straw initiative by the hospital’s Executive Team.

The new “by request” distribution process was implemented as a hospital-wide initiative within 14 days from Executive approval. Wesley’s Procurement Department was engaged to remove the original standard plastic straws from the procurement catalogue; therefore, once the inventory of standard plastic straws was exhausted, all straws ordered and distributed were the new paper or flexi plastic options. The ordering process remained the same, with all straws still purchased by and delivered to Hospitality Services; however, flexi plastic straws are now requisitioned to wards only upon request by clinical staff, to allow nurses to provide them to patients with specific clinical needs.

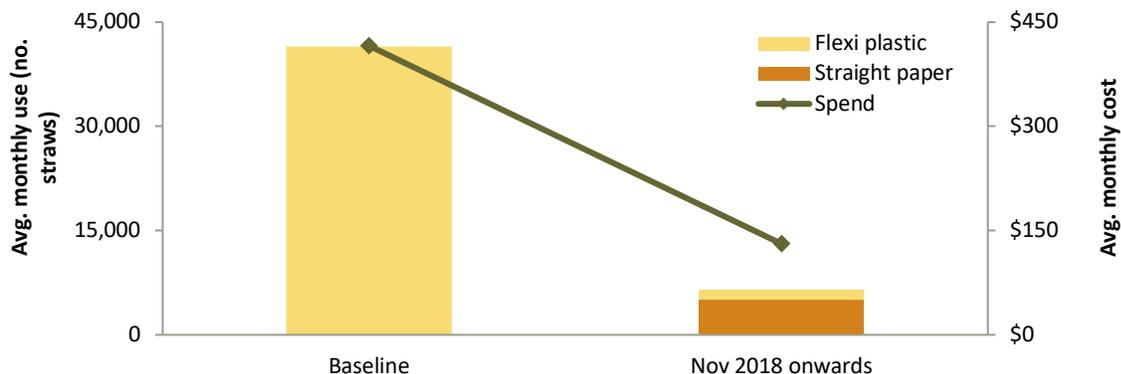
Early communication was critical to the successful rollout of this straw initiative, and entailed the following activities in the lead up to the ‘go live’ date:

1. Hospitality Manager presented at Clinical Nurse Managers meeting to provide information of the incoming changes, including how nurses could request flexible plastic straws for patients.
2. Clinical Nurse Managers relayed the key information to their clinical teams during regular team huddles.
3. New work procedures were drafted for hospitality and clinical staff, and communicated to the Hospitality Team and all hospital wards, accompanied by an Executive statement of endorsement.

Tracking Progress

Progress has been measured using procurement data, comparing baseline (FY18) straw spend and volume against monthly data for January to April 2019. These figures were extrapolated to estimate the ongoing annual benefits of the initiative.

The outcomes have been positive: The Wesley has reduced total monthly usage by 84% (original 41,500 plastic straws now reduced to 5,000 paper and 1,500 flexi plastic straws). This is avoiding 480,000 plastic straws and saving the hospital \$3,420 annually. Furthermore, feedback from patients has been largely positive, with people recognising the paper straws as a symbol of The Wesley’s commitment to a healthier planet.



Challenges and lessons learned

Because The Wesley's original practice was to provide flexible straws to everyone, the new straw initiative—which had the dual purpose of reducing overall straw usage and changing the default product to a paper option—was initially met with some pushback from nursing staff over concerns that the clinical needs of some patients would not be met. To gain clinical support for the initiative, it was critical to clearly communicate that a suitable flexi plastic option would remain available in the hospital, but that the issuing of these would become a clinical responsibility (i.e. no longer the default for all patients).

Next Steps

The Wesley Hospital is now aiming to completely phase out plastic straws, by replacing the remaining flexible plastic straws (used for clinical purposes) with flexible paper straws. Several product options have been identified; the next step is to conduct testing to ensure quality and care criteria are met, and to select the most suitable product.

Demographic information

The Wesley is a 535-bed private, not-for-profit hospital in Auchenflower (Brisbane), and part of the UnitingCare Queensland group. More than 800 Visiting Medical Practitioners and 2,000 staff provide care across a wide range of medical and surgical services with a particular focus on cancer care, cardiac care, women's and children's care, and complex surgical care.

Quotes:

"The straw initiative really resonates with staff and makes them keen to look at other initiatives as well such as waste segregation."

– Director of Corporate Services

"It was numerous small steps that made this a simple yet achievable initiative."

– Hospitality Manager

Keywords / topics: Straws, single-use plastics, waste, procurement, hospitality

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