

## Healthcare procurement must not come at 'expense of environment, health and workers' rights'

When European healthcare is provided at the expense of the environment, workers' health, and international human rights, hospitals need to radically change the way they procure their goods and services, argues Anja Leetz.

It's not only the textile industry where the social and labour standards of production fall well below international law. In the production of healthcare goods, research has found risks of child labour, excessive overtime, violations of labour legislation, dangerous working environments and environmental degradation.

The European healthcare sector, with its 2.8 million hospital beds and 12,990 hospitals, is a major public purchaser of goods and services. In the process of treating patients and offering the best possible patient care, the healthcare sector consumes an enormous amount of energy and water, as well as disposable products, building materials, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices, all of which are generating a huge amount of waste.

As much as 80 per cent of the standard products used in healthcare, such as paper, gloves, packaging materials, paper towels, surgical instruments are thrown away after a single use, inevitably polluting the environment. In addition, some of the products used in healthcare contain toxic substances, for example mercury, DEHP, BPA and others that are a detriment to the environment and to human health.

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Anja Leetz

In addition to the environmental and health impact, there is increasing evidence that the global supply chains of these commodities infringe, in some cases, on the basic labour and human rights of the people they employ, affecting their health as a result of unsafe and indecent working conditions. For example, around 10 million surgical instruments used each year by the NHS in the UK are manufactured in northern Pakistan. Poor remuneration contributes to the proliferation of child labour. Thousands of children are employed full-time in this industry, some as young as seven.

This is the so-called healthcare paradox, when healthcare is provided at the expense of the environment, workers' health, and international human rights. Green and ethical public procurement is a system that identifies and avoids these problems. Many alternatives already exist and these products can be purchased today.

The spending power of public authorities, including hospitals, represents a real opportunity for the healthcare sector to take the lead in procuring goods, services and works in an environmentally and socially sustainable way. From eliminating unnecessary packaging, to seeking substitutes for products containing mercury or other toxic substances, to purchasing renewable energy, and to choosing items that are produced in a socially responsible way, purchasing decisions can have a major impact and can provide healthcare without harm.

After the agreement reached in June 2013 between the European commission, the European parliament and the EU council on the new directive on public procurement and its adoption by MEPs in the internal market and consumer protection committee, it is time to discuss the implications of green and social public procurement for the healthcare sector. The revision of the EU directive aims at making public procurement rules simpler and more flexible, while fostering the introduction of social and environmental criteria in the use of public

procurement.

Considering this, Brussels based NGO Health Care Without Harm Europe has organised a workshop that will bring together EU policymakers and European public procurers to showcase best practices of green and social public procurement in the European healthcare sector.

By adopting an experience sharing approach, the workshop will provide comparative information and data from different case studies across Europe, stimulate the debate on the link between green and social public procurement and offer recommendations for the long-term sustainability of the European healthcare sector.

**Anja Leetz is executive director of Health Care Without Harm Europe**

*The workshop 'Sustainable Public Procurement in European Healthcare' will be held on 2 October at the Science 14 Atrium, Rue de la Science 14b, 1040 Brussels. For more information, contact [Grazia Cioci](#).*