

Why Should Hospitals Care about Healthy Beverages?

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Healthcare organizations across the country are adopting a health focus as a way to prepare for new changes in healthcare, many focusing on population health and adding the word “health” to their name as they rebrand themselves. If all of us are serious about this effort, we need to look at beverages as a key component of addressing health. With obesity competing with tobacco for the title of “biggest cause of preventable death” in the United States, we need to start approaching obesity in a similar manner to how we approached tobacco. Most hospital campuses do not sell cigarettes, but many sell sugar-sweetened beverages which account for about half of the excess calories leading to the obesity epidemic.

The first time I started thinking about this problem was in my own clinic several years ago. I was in the exam room seeing a patient with Type 2 Diabetes. Unfortunately, her diabetes was still out of control. I was talking with her about the need to increase her diabetes medications and that we would need to consider starting her on insulin. She asked what she could do as she took a drink from the bottle of Dr. Pepper she had with her. “Well”, I told her, “the first thing you could do is quit drinking that Dr. Pepper you have with you.” Later that day, as I was walking out of the clinic to go to the hospital, I realized that in the entrance to our building was a vending machine with Dr. Pepper emblazoned across the front of it. Our healthcare facility’s vending machine was likely where she had just bought that Dr. Pepper she was drinking in my exam room which was worsening her diabetes!

As I thought more about this, I came to realize that selling Dr. Pepper to our diabetics in the entrance to our building was almost as bad as selling cigarettes to our patients with emphysema. No hospital or clinic would sell cigarettes, and even CVS recently has come to the same realization and quit selling cigarettes. Many healthcare facilities are coming to the same realization with sugar-sweetened beverages. Nationally-recognized health systems like the Cleveland Clinic and almost every hospital in Boston, have started moving to healthy beverage vending policies.

Here in Nebraska, CHI Health St. Elizabeth has started moving to healthier beverage vending and worked with Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln and Nebraska’s worksite wellness councils (WorkWell, WELCOM, Panhandle Worksite Wellness) to develop Nebraska’s Guide to Healthy Beverages at Work (access the free guide at www.HealthyLincoln.org). We encourage your health system to take a look, and consider this approach to actively work toward improving the health of your community by moving to healthier beverages in your facility.

About the Author: Dr. Rauner is the Director of Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln (HealthyLincoln.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to improving community health by decreasing obesity and increasing fitness.

