

Thinking of Buying...Drug Storage Systems

Secured-supply storage products go well beyond preventing the improper use of medications.

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In addition to providing security against the theft or unmonitored use of medications, drug storage systems can help you ensure patient safety, manage inventory and purchasing, improve workflow efficiency and, of course, earn points with accreditation bodies.

The secured-supply storage market can be divided into two fields of products: manual equipment, such as double-locking carts and cabinets, and automated equipment, the computer-driven dispensers that open with a numeric code or biometric thumbprint. In either field, the major manufacturers' products aren't significantly different in terms of functionality or security, so your choice of drug storage options will likely be decided by how your facility is set up and operates, and what its budget is. We've highlighted a few sample products for your review on the pages that follow.

Financial issues

When you're considering a drug storage purchase, perhaps the primary factor dividing manual from automated options is cost. The cost of manual storage can range from a few hundred dollars to a couple of thousand dollars, depending on the size and specifications of the unit. Automated systems, however, can easily reach tens of thousands of dollars.

In recent years, leases for automated systems haven't been inexpensive, either, although leasing offers the advantages of included maintenance and software upgrades. If you've made the buy, those will likely be added to your financial responsibilities.

Because secured storage is one of those equipment purchases you're not directly reimbursed for, you'll have to weigh the consideration of a more expensive unit against a realistic estimate of just how much it will improve security and workflow processes such as pulling supplies for a case or documenting medication counts.

As a result, many surgery centers may find it difficult to justify the cost of a computer-based drug dispensing system. For hospitals, it's a different issue, not just due to the larger budget, but also because of the larger number and different status of patients requiring heightened safeguards. But they're not often seen at ASCs — unless they're hospital-affiliated ASCs, in which case the purchasing decision may be driven by what the hospital's chosen for technical uniformity.

Connectivity

An automated drug storage system may represent a huge capital purchase, but for the right facility its time and resource management improvements may pay for themselves in the long run. If the system is up to speed with the rest of your facility's technology, that is.

As with an increasing amount of surgical equipment, such a system will require data lines connecting its storage device to the computer that's tracking inventory. You may have built, or added, conduits for data cables into your ORs or procedure rooms, but what about in your supply rooms or other places an automated system may be installed?

You'll also want to make sure that whichever system you're considering is compatible with your facility's information management system. This will be necessary if you want its tracking abilities to complement your purchasing process. Plus, sooner or later you'll find it helpful for that information to be delivered into electronic medical records.

Be sure to identify and interview other users of the systems you're considering to get their views on performance and reliability, specifically their experiences with implementation, maintenance response and how often the software is upgraded.

Place and space

Whether you're purchasing an automated system or manual equipment, you'll need to think logically about where the components will be installed and how best they'll serve your facility's processes.

A large hospital will likely have secure storage in numerous locations including pre-op, post-op, the pharmacy, labs and even at patient bedsides. At less expansive surgery centers, though, such storage is generally confined to a supply room, with smaller units in or near the ORs or procedure rooms providing narcotics for the anesthesia providers.

Make sure that the placement of storage serves all operative areas. Unless you've noticed that your staff is bogged down in a highly inefficient workflow, proper locations should sensibly conform to their paths. You'll want your drug storage within reach, so as not to be running all over the place or leaving the OR or procedure room midway through a case.

Keep in mind, too, that while storage component sizes vary, they're still joining the anesthesia machine, monitor cart and other equipment occupying OR real estate or parked in the storage room. Storage, of course, doesn't earn your facility money, so seek out efficient design if space is at a premium in your facility.

Managing change

In the event that your new storage system will indeed change the way your staff will work, you'll likely need to budget time for training them and time for them to get used to the new system.

For instance, adding in-OR drug storage equipment means that nurses might not have to retrieve the narcotics that anesthesia providers request for a case; instead, anesthesia providers will have another responsibility.

In order to counter the "this is the way we've always done it" resistance you might encounter, you'll need to involve as many staff members as possible in the planning and in the awareness of the efficiency gains the new storage system can offer. A wide range of staff input can net insights on the methods of storage they've worked with before in other facilities, while also helping to ensure that the system you eventually settle on works for as many people as possible.