Lewis County General Hospital unveils 'Hector the Disinfector'

LOWVILLE — Pathogens and bacteria beware. "Hector the Disinfector" is on the job at Lewis County General Hospital.

"I'm excited for the patients and the residents," Karen Aubertine, infection prevention and environmental services manager at the county-owned hospital, said Tuesday during a media unveiling of the robot cleaner. "It's such a good protection for them."

Hector, a Xenex Lightstrike™ Germ-Zapping Robot that was named through an employee poll, is now being used by custodial staff to more completely disinfect many rooms following their regular cleaning, Mrs. Aubertine said.

"We're disinfecting the operating rooms every night, whether they're used or not," she said. Rachael Sparks, technical director at Xenex Disinfection Services, said the robot uses a xenon ultraviolet flashlamp to emit intense blasts of UV-C light, which is found naturally in sunlight but is completely filtered by the Earth's atmosphere.

After activation, Hector's top slides up, revealing a large UV bulb that bathes the room with light until the disinfecting cycle ends.

The 3-foot-tall device is generally left in an empty room for five-minute cycles, Ms. Sparks said. And, since it operates on a line-of-sight principle, rooms containing beds generally require two cycles, one for each side of the bed, she said.

Dangerous pathogens like Ebola, MRSA or C.Diff can potentially be missed by regular cleaning or even mutate to resist some chemicals, so bathing the room in ultraviolet light afterward can bring more reassurance the room is germ-free, Mrs. Aubertine said.

"This literally destroys the DNA, so it's gone," she said, commending hospital administrators for supporting the purchase.

Xenex officials said the hospital here is the first in the north country — and one of roughly 400 in the country — that are now using one of their germ-zapping robots.

"Lewis County General Hospital is really investing in something that is cutting edge," Mrs. Sparks said.

"We want to do everything within our means to provide a clean environment at our facilities to reduce the risk of hospital acquired infections," said interim chief executive officer Michele E. Prince.

And, given the facility also operates a 160-bed nursing home, hospital officials will be considering whether to purchase a second unit to "keep up with all the rooms," she said.

Although each robot costs roughly $100,000, Xenex Business Development Manager Anthony Iannone said treating infections picked up at the hospital can cost roughly $12,000 to $20,000 per patient, and Medicare and Medicaid won't reimburse any of those expenses. "If you could take care of four or five infections, that essentially pays for itself," he said.

The knowledge such a machine is in use could also help draw patients to a facility, Mr. Iannone said.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 25 hospital patients in the U.S. has at least one hospital-associated infection, or infections, acquired while receiving medical treatment. In 2011, approximately 722,000 HAIs were reported in hospitals across the country and around 75,000 HAI patients died during their hospitalizations.

A "show-bot" model and more information on the robot will be on display in the hospital lobby for the next couple weeks.

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