

Scrubbing up

Changes are afoot in the healthcare uniform sector, both in the styles and colours of garments chosen by buyers, and in the way these are supplied. Lotte Debell reports.

The UK healthcare sector involves huge volumes of clothing, both in the NHS and private hospitals, residential nursing and care homes. It's a traditional industry when it comes to uniforms, but like all corporate wear it is evolving. An awareness of fashion is creeping in, and with potential changes to the national contract for the NHS on the horizon, big things could be about to happen in this sector.

PASA, the NHS purchasing and supply agency contract, has become the NHS Supply Chain, operated by DHL. This is a ten-year contract awarded to DHL Logistics on behalf of the NHS Business Service Authority, that brings together the skills and experience of DHL, the former NHS Logistics and parts of the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency as well as consultants from Novation, a US-based group purchasing organisation.

It has been set up to manage the procurement and delivery of more than 500,000 products for NHS Trusts, hospitals and other healthcare organisations. Its aim is to deliver £1bn in savings to the NHS over the period of the contract by providing cost-effective supply chain services to healthcare providers across England, with the savings directed back to NHS managers for patient care. The theory is that by increasing the volumes ordered and focusing on the range and cost of its portfolio of products, the NHS Supply Chain will be able to offer its customers, the Trusts and other healthcare organisations, quality products at more competitive prices.

What does this mean for suppliers? Well, as yet, the status quo is unchanged. Under the PASA agreement, there were three nominated

suppliers of uniform garments: Alexandra, Boyd Cooper and Simon Jersey. At the end of last year their contract was extended for a further 12 months, but at the end of 2008 this comes to an end and the contracts will go out for tender. According to Simon Jersey, this could lead to major changes in the method of supply, and present potentially exciting opportunities for those suppliers who are prepared to look at new avenues.

However, if the supply chain is getting a makeover, what about the uniforms? Is a sector that has traditionally been quite conservative, and for which navy blue has long been the colour of choice, becoming more adventurous in its clothing options? The changes in the NHS contract, says Hannah Ranby of Alexandra, a company that has been supplying the health service for 20 years, has brought with it a new energy in NHS procurement. 'We worked very well with PASA, but the new NHS Supply Chain has the resources to be more proactive. The NHS is a large, complex organisation, and change doesn't happen overnight, but looking back at our sales over the last couple of years, demand for new, modern and technologically advanced uniforms is on the increase.'

Nurses' dresses, traditionally the mainstay of the healthcare sector, are not as popular as they were. In their place are tunics and trousers, a change by no means confined to the NHS. In the private sector as well, uniform buyers like the more up-to-date, practical image presented by tunics and trousers. Of Alexandra's top ten products, only one is a dress and five are tunics. The same story is repeated at Greenbergs, a company that supplies the NHS as well as the private sector,

where eight of its top ten products are tunics and trousers. Another supplier, Queen Eleanor, has also found success with the cropped trouser, a style with its roots in high street fashion that has found a niche for itself in healthcare.

Scrub tunics and trousers are also taking off, and Hannah Ranby believes this has as much to do with their casual, more contemporary image as it does with comfort and convenience. 'Smart scrubs' are also becoming more popular. 'Standard scrub suits tend to be quite lightweight and casual, but some Trusts who want scrubs and also want to maintain a smarter image, are asking us for what we call "smart scrubs". These are made from heavier weight fabrics, for example 195gsm rather than 150gsm, and present a crisper appearance.'

Another trend is for the slightly misleadingly named Reversible Scrubs. No, not garments that are worn once, turned inside out and worn again — this is the NHS and hygiene is impor-

tant — but garments that are designed specifically for industrial laundry processes and can be worn either way around. The laundry does not have to make sure all the garments are turned the right way out, removing a time consuming process and saving on cost.

Alexandra produces scrubs in a wide range of stock colours and fulfils bespoke orders for Trusts that require scrubs in different colours to define departments. Colour has always been important in healthcare, and it is not uncommon, especially in the bigger hospitals, to find a large number of different colours used for both the body of garments and their epaulettes to denote different grades of staff and their departments. Greenbergs supplies one NHS Trust with garments in 16 different colourways.

Navy has, of course, been a long-time favourite, and although other colours are beginning to come into wider use, it remains a strong presence. One reason for this, says >>>



Uniforms

►► Jackie Brown of Queen Eleanor, is that navy is the traditional colour worn by nurses. 'A lot of nurses look forward to putting on the navy uniform once they have qualified because it shows they are a nurse. After three years in training it is a sign that they have achieved their goal. In the care homes sector, where not everyone is a qualified nurse, they tend to more flexible on colours and often want more fashionable shades, but in the NHS navy is still a big seller.'

Residential nursing and care home groups tend to be the most adventurous when it comes to colour and style. Queen Eleanor has recently had a lot of success in this sector with purple and pink. 'These colours have been around for a while, but people are looking to fashion for inspiration a lot more now, and just because someone is wearing a tunic does not mean they can't be in a bright, fashion colour.'



Alexandra's 'smart scrubs' are made from a heavier weight fabric for a crisper appearance.

"A lot of nurses look forward to putting on the navy once they have qualified"

Most care groups are looking for something distinctive, such as purple and white, or pink and black, and these tunics have lovely pearl studs, side vents and modern styling. We have taken these colours to a few shows, and had the purple on the catwalk at the Workwear and Corporate Clothing show, and it was an absolute hit. People love it.'

Greenbergs has noticed a similar trend, says Lewis Greenberg. In the last few years lilac has been a big seller, and more and more care homes are buying tunics and trousers from the company's beauty range because they like the styles and the colours – reds, lilacs and neutral shades such as duck egg. 'We offer our healthcare garments in an average of 12 colours from stock, but if a customer wants a bespoke colour we offer our stock garments in any colour with a minimum order of 50 as long as they stick to the garment spec. Thereafter, we will honour the colourway for reorderers.'

Styles are also changing. Greenbergs' range for the beauty sector includes bootleg and low waisted trousers, and healthcare buyers are showing an interest in these styles. Alexandra too has noticed that bootleg trousers are popular with younger nurses, although the traditional straight leg style continues to sell well. 'We are also seeing an increase in demand for



Queen Eleanor has had a lot of success in residential nursing and care homes with its purple and pink uniforms.

spot prints from some senior staff, which we fulfil through our bespoke service, as well as a general preference for lighter fabrics. Hospitals are quite warm environments to work in, and people are looking for the comfort of lighter garments. The traditional weight of a nurse's dress is 210gsm and we have introduced lots of new products at 150gsm – making them noticeably cooler to wear and yet still appear smart and easy to care for.'

One innovation, however, has yet to make significant inroads into either the NHS or the private sector, and that is antimicrobial uniforms. 'In the last year I have been asked about this less than six times,' says Lewis. 'I think people don't know enough about the technology to pay the extra, and there is no general acceptance that it can help with infection control. We had one supplier who wanted us to make a stock range in an antimicrobial fabric, but they had no interest in it at all.'

According to Alexandra, however, which stocks a range of antimicrobial uniforms using See it Safe fabric from Toray Textiles, hospitals are beginning to invest in this technology in conjunction with other infection control practices such as regular hand-washing and improved cleaning. 'A growing number

of Trusts are showing an interest,' says Hannah. 'In particular, West Middlesex University Hospital Trust is using the fabric in its garments for junior doctors and we are working on a big enquiry from another Trust to supply antimicrobial scrub suits for all nursing staff. We are continuing to work with the NHS to raise awareness of the technology and its benefits, which include the secondary benefits of eliminating odours and fungus. Infection control is a big issue in the media and Trusts know they must be seen to be doing something about it, and it can help them to reduce costs in the long term.'

Infection control is having an influence on buying trends of standard fabrics as well as the newer antimicrobial fabrics. Hospitals were given a Deep Clean budget by the government earlier this year, and Alexandra experienced a significant increase in uniform purchases around this time. 'While there are other factors involved, uniforms do seem to be recognised as one way to control the spread of infection, and we are seeing a trend for more uniforms being issued to staff. Where once a nurse was issued with three uniforms, we are now seeing five or seven. In some situations, staff are being issued with two uniforms per shift.' ■

STYLES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Anyone looking for a different perspective on healthcare uniforms might be interested in Overwear and Duchess, a South African company that specialises in the manufacture of medical and paramedical clothing as well as corporate garments.

Duchess manufactures in South Africa, supplying garments both direct to end users and to the trade, with a customer base that includes private hospital groups, pharmacies, pathologists and blood banks, as well as the fulfilment of large government tenders for nurses, doctors, cleaners and kitchen staff.

'Our stock range allows us to be a one-stop supplier covering all aspects of the uni-

form requirements of businesses,' says David Waight. 'We manufacture all kinds of garments from corporate jackets to cleaning overalls, using fabrics that have been developed through years of experience to meet the demands of the South African climate, which ranges from very cold to hot and humid. Specifically for medical use, we have developed a 180gsm 65/35 polycotton designed to meet the stringent demands of this industry. The fabric can be autoclaved and still retain its quality, even with continuous washing in hospital conditions, and is used extensively in hospital tenders.'

On the back of the company's success in South Africa, Duchess is looking to expand its business into the UK, and is currently seeking agents through which to distribute its range. ■