

Surgical spirit

In April the NHS Supply Chain announced the companies selected as the preferred suppliers to the NHS. **Dan Worth** talks to those involved about the contract and the specific considerations for uniforms supplied to the NHS – including the controversial issue of anti-microbial garments.

For the first time since 1919 Europe is officially in the grip of a flu pandemic. The Swine Flu threat has gone global, according to the World Health Organisation, and the importance of hygiene is high in the public consciousness. Within the NHS and private hospitals infection control and hygiene are major topics. The rise of superbugs like MRSA has made the way staff wash and dress more important than ever and the use, or not, of anti-microbial fabrics in uniforms is an interesting debate.

This is just one of the issues that companies supplying the NHS with uniforms have to take into account. The NHS Supply Chain is the department of the NHS responsible for approving suppliers to NHS trusts, and between October 2008 and March 2009 it retendered for uniform suppliers. On April 1 the six selected companies were announced: Alexandra, Dimensions (through Boyd Cooper), Grahame Gardner, Meltemi Company Clothing, Nurse Care Uniform and Simon Jersey.

The framework agreement of the NHS Supply Chain allows these companies to approach NHS trusts with garment prices agreed in the tender process, helping trusts save time and money by avoiding individual tender processes. This would otherwise be necessary under European law, but because the NHS Supply Chain has carried out a tender process as a framework agreement it is no longer required.

For the tender companies were judged on four criteria: service levels (through a series of questions on sales, service, and quality), price, wearer trials and discounts (settlement discounts for customers).

Trusts can choose to ignore these results and issue their own tenders, but this is time consuming and expensive, and in an industry where time and money are in short supply, the preferred suppliers framework agreement is designed to help trusts make informed, cost-effective, and efficient decisions.

Grahame Gardner makes the list for the first time and sales director Simon Ward says this was one of the company's key objectives for 2009. 'We had been targeting the tender for the NHS Supply Chain for some time. We put significant investment and resources into our submission, so we're very pleased to be selected. We've supplied the NHS since its inception in 1948 and during this time we've seen many changes in the industry, and have adapted as necessary to provide fit-for-purpose garments. Now we can bring our offering to a wider range of trusts.'

Grahame Gardner offers a staple selection of key traditional garments such as tunics, dresses and trousers that have been popular for many years, but new styles are added regularly. 'About every 18 months or so we bring out a few new products to reflect new designs and high street trends, such as boot cut or hipster trousers and scrubs in bright and vibrant colours. Sometimes they prove so popular they become staple garments, as happened with our Mandarin collar tunics which were such a success that they are now core items in our range.'

Nurse Care Uniform is another new supplier on the list. The company has supplied various areas of the NHS for over 30 years from Southampton, where it also has a manufacturing plant. In this time it has secured contracts with major trusts such as York, and Derby. 'Being selected by large trusts on individual tenders in the past demonstrates we have the quality required by the NHS to be a key supplier,' says sales director Sean Elms. 'Now, through inclusion in the NHS Supply Chain, we will be able to further increase this offering to new trusts, opening doors for us that previously may not have been open.'

Since the new suppliers were announced the company has already been in discussion with NHS trusts about the possibility of supplying new uniforms, which Sean admits would not have been possible if Nurse Care Uniform was not on the Supply Chain.



Left: Anti-microbial garments from Alexandra. Above: As a newly-selected NHS supplier Grahame Gardner is able to offer its garments to a wide range of trusts. Below: Nurse Care Uniform is another new addition to the preferred suppliers list.

Being a supplier to the NHS means keeping abreast of changes in the industry and bringing out new garments accordingly, says Simon Ward. And one of the biggest focuses in the NHS in recent years has been on infection control and hygiene standards. 'Infection control is a key area where design has to be considered in relation to NHS guidelines, so when the Department of Health issued infection control guidelines that called for short sleeves on garments, we had to produce all our doctors' coats in short-sleeved versions – something we managed in two weeks. We now offer all our garments with a short-sleeve option and can adapt to changes if they occur.'

A controversial aspect of infection control is the use of anti-microbial fabrics in garments. When *Company Clothing* last covered this issue there was some disagreement on the effectiveness of treatments, and Simon concedes that more could be done to make clear the benefits of the treatments. 'We offer anti-microbial fabrics and some people are very keen on this technology. However, a lot of buyers remain unaware or unsure of the merits of these garments and stick to traditional offerings. We will always offer both as we have customers who choose

"It doesn't seem worth adding a finish if it won't last the life of the garment"

them, but it remains a niche area. However, potentially all it needs is one big trust to make a large purchase and we could see the popularity of these garments snowball.'

Grahame Gardner is not alone in encountering differing opinions among buyers on this issue. Boyd Cooper, a division of Dimensions and a long-standing approved NHS Supply Chain supplier, reports that there is still a lot of confusion in the industry. Commercial director Carl Tennant says: 'A lot of people either remain unconvinced of the benefits, or lack evidence to support the reduction in infections. And, as the subject is not covered within NHS guidelines, unlike, say, short sleeve garments, people don't see the need or reason to select garments using anti-microbial fabrics, particularly with the premium price they carry. The vast majority of customers that use this technology do so to ensure they are taking every reasonable effort to reduce the chance of cross contamination.'

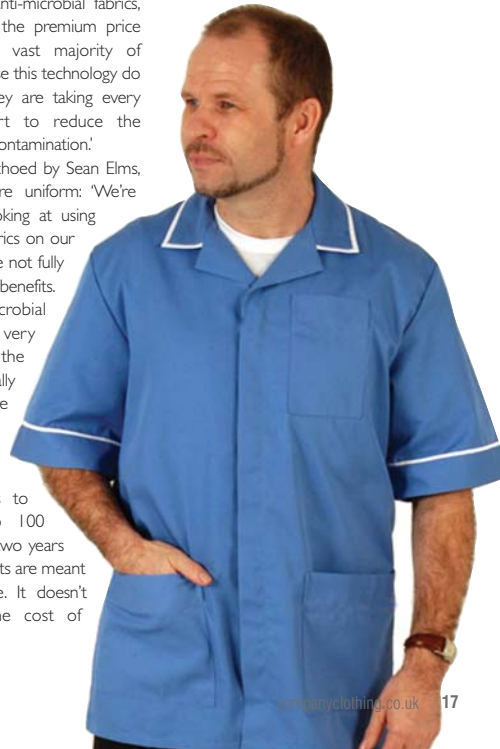
This view is echoed by Sean Elms, from Nurse Care uniform: 'We're currently not looking at using anti-microbial fabrics on our garments as we're not fully convinced of the benefits. Adding anti-microbial technology is very expensive, and the NHS is traditionally an area where costs are tightly managed. For example, one treatment claims to last for up to 100 washes – about two years – but our garments are meant to last for three. It doesn't seem worth the cost of

adding a finish if it won't last the lifetime of the garment.'

Instead of using anti-microbial treatment, Sean believes a return to issuing staff with a higher number of garments is a more productive means of infection control. 'By providing nurses with seven or more garments, they can wash them regularly, and remain free from infections, without resorting to expensive treatments.'

Alexandra, however, another of the preferred suppliers, has a slightly more positive take. The company has developed a range of anti-microbial garments, including tunics, trousers and dresses that offer increased protection against the spread of bacteria, and is seeing a continual take-up of these garments, says Emma Moore, NHS and medical senior sales manager.

One trust that Alexandra supplies is The Hillingdon Hospital NHS Trust in Middlesex, and Jacqueline Walker, deputy director of infection prevention and control and nursing at Hillingdon, outlines the trust's view on anti-microbial garments. 'We >>>





Staff at the NHS Hillingdon Hospital wear anti-microbial uniforms from Alexandra to provide increased safety for patients and their environment.

►► want to make sure we're doing everything we can to combat healthcare-associated infections. The use of anti-microbial uniforms that actively fight the proliferation of bacteria is one more step towards reducing cross contamination, so in partnership with Alexandra we have invested in new style uniforms for all our clinical staff.

The new uniform includes scrub tunics worn with trousers, which are favoured by staff for their design and comfort. The silver technology fabric provides anti-microbial protection, and therefore increased safety for our patients and their environment, while offering a comfortable, practical and smart uniform for staff. In turn staff have welcomed the change to support improved infection prevention and control measures.'

Infection control through clothing is not just limited to garments. Footwear, and particularly how to use it to minimise the spread of infections, is also an important concern. Specialist supplier Hygicare provides footwear to the medical industry and has seen an increase in interest from NHS trusts in the last few years, says

managing director Tony Fawcett. 'Hygiene cannot be overlooked in hospitals, underlined by the recent Swine Flu outbreak. Providing footwear that offers protection against the spread of infections is an important element.'

A key product offered by Hygicare is the HygiBoot. This is made from virgin plastic and injected with a bactericide that fights against potentially harmful bacteria to keep infections down to a minimum. There is also a liner available for the inside of the boot made from a material called See it Safe from Toray Textiles. A silver thread is woven into the material to provide a combination of anti-microbial, anti-bacterial and anti-odour properties, as well as thermally dynamic performance – keeping feet warm in cool conditions and vice versa. Tony notes: 'As the product is a boot it is designed for use in high-risk areas like mortuaries, rather than by doctors or nurses, and is used by various NHS trusts.'

A new leather shoe called the HygiLiner can be used by other staff, and has an anti-bacterial sole. This is seeing an increase in popularity,

“Staff welcomed the change to support improved infection prevention”

although Tony concedes that more awareness of the benefits is needed: 'People are becoming more educated in the importance of protecting against infections and how different elements like footwear can help. Footwear is part of the solution and should be included in the overall hygiene programme to provide the best possible protection.'

While infection control and how best to achieve it is a hot topic, it is far from the only consideration when it comes to medical uniforms. Just like other professions, healthcare workers need garments that are comfortable, durable and fit for purpose.

This is something that Alexandra places a strong emphasis on. 'We are aware that staff need garments that do not interfere with their work and so use lightweight fabrics of either 150gsm, 180gsm or 195gsm to help keep staff cool and comfortable,' says Emma. 'We also ensure zips are concealed to prevent them catching, and provide good freedom of movement to accommodate any bending or stretching.'

Updating and improving garments to make them as comfortable and lightweight as possible is an area that Boyd Copper has focused on heavily. 'It can get very hot working in hospitals so we tend to use a lighter weight polycotton as standard, and have had some great success developing a new fabric to further improve this,' says Carl Tennant. 'In the past people didn't realise the difference the fabric choice had in the comfort of the garment. Our approach is to create the best possible comfort for the wearers.'

Hospital staff are not alone in requiring the right garments, however. Patients also need fit-for-purpose clothing and a new range of garments from Alexandra seeks to address one

of the key problems in hospitals – providing patients with an improved level of privacy and dignity. Emma says: 'It's important for patients to feel comfortable in hospital and clothing plays a part in this. If a patient has a garment that can accommodate medical apparatus like a catheter, but does so while providing them with comfort and privacy, they feel better.'

In conjunction with staff within urology at the Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust, including consultants, research and development staff and nurses, Alexandra has co-designed and produced a new product called the BGS pyjamas.

These minimise the risk of a 'kink' occurring when catheters are used with traditional pyjamas, and offer greater privacy, dignity and comfort, as well as helping to control infection. The BGS Pyjamas are currently going through wearer trials and are expected to prove successful.

Such innovations underline the continually changing nature of the medical sector, and a recent example of this is the choice of colours worn for the purposes of identification. 'At the Hillingdon NHS Trust senior staff now wear darker coloured garments to help the public recognise them more clearly,' says Emma from Alexandra. 'This reflects a return to more traditional colours and styles within hospitals, something both the staff and patients are keen to see.'

Boyd Cooper has also noted the shift back to traditional colours and styles, which Carl Tennant thinks is understandable. 'Colour is important for distinguishing between different roles within hospitals. Using products in royal blues and navy blues for nurses and ward sisters, for example, helps patients identify staff more readily.'

Boyd Cooper is able to provide bespoke volumes of garments, which Carl says is popular with customers. 'The ability to offer custom colour trims and logos on garments allows trusts to communicate a clear brand identity. This can be important for trusts so we make sure that we cater for it, particularly on very small volume orders.' ■