

Is it time to take another look at reusable protective gear in the wake of COVID-19?

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With frontline healthcare workers clamouring for more facemasks, gloves and other protective gear, one Montreal company says reusables can help fill the gap amid looming shortages of disposable supplies.

Because it takes the same amount of time to get a disposable gown and a reusable one manufactured and delivered to hospitals, reusables can go much further in treating the expected surge in coronavirus cases in the coming weeks and months.

“Since there’s not enough to go around ... every reusable one you get here, it’s the equivalent of 75 to 100 of the disposable ones,” said Jeff Courey, president and CEO of George Courey Inc (GCI), a Montreal-based company that specializes in producing reusable isolation gowns, surgical gowns and scrubs.

In the past few days, reports have proliferated of doctors and nurses being asked to ration personal protective equipment, a message that clashes with reassurances from political leaders that there will be enough to meet demand.

“We’re getting more masks. We have 12 million gloves on order, coming in. If they’re short, we’re going to make sure that we fulfill the requirements,” said Premier Doug Ford on Tuesday.

The shortage of PPE in parts of the U.S. has become so extreme that researchers at Duke University have developed a method to sterilize and re-use disposable masks. The Centers for Disease Control updated its guidelines last week to recommend healthcare professionals use bandanas to cover their faces if nothing else is available. Meanwhile, several American hospitals have issued call outs for volunteers to sew surgical masks at home.

Courey says unlike the homemade equipment Americans are being forced to resort to the certified reusable PPE his company makes is as safe and effective as disposable PPE.

“I can appreciate that everyone wants to help reduce this shortage as quickly as possible. But it also makes me very, very nervous,” he said.

“There’s a specific fabric that you need to make proper PPE that will actually protect the person. It’s not like you can just go and take, you know, whatever piece of poly cotton fabric and make an isolation gown.”

“The isolation gowns that we make use a specialized fabric that is tested and inspected to make sure that it actually does what it’s supposed to do, which is protect the user,” said Courey.

In the last 10 days, GCI has sold more than 300,000 gowns — almost as many as it has in the last eight years. The emergency stockpile of between 75,000 and 100,000 gowns was sold out within a few days.

While people might instinctively feel that disposable PPE is safer, Courey says it’s important to understand supply chains to appreciate how safety and quality can differ.

The vast majority of disposable PPE is made in China and southeast Asia, where it must be manufactured, packaged, shipped and warehoused before being delivered to the end user.

“There are so many opportunities for that gown to be potentially contaminated,” said Courey. “Our gowns are inspected, checked and sterilized locally after every single use.”

Instead of being thrown out after each patient encounter, reusable PPE can be washed, sterilized and reused 75 to 100 times.

“We sell them usually to institutional healthcare laundries — huge companies with multi-million dollar pieces of equipment. (The gown) goes right through and comes out on the other side of the laundry with very minimal human contact. It’s sterilized, packaged and ready to be sent back to the hospital,” he said.

“They’re very, very safe.”

Beyond their practicality in times of pandemic, reusable gowns are also better for the bottom line (they have a lower lifecycle cost than disposables) and they’re better for the environment.

“I shudder to think at how many disposable isolation gowns are going to be in landfills once the COVID-19 crisis is behind us,” he said.

All that single-use plastic that hospitals and health care workers are desperate for today contributes to the degradation of our environment and the warming of the planet.

“Let’s not solve the crisis of today, which is COVID-19, by adding to the crisis of tomorrow, which is climate change,” said Courey.



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