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Hospital to lock up hand-sanitizer dispensers

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THE Health Sciences Centre will begin padlocking some of its hand-sanitizer dispensers in an effort to cut down on theft and potential abuse.

The move came after the province's largest hospital realized as many as 116 bags of alcohol-based sanitizer were disappearing monthly from its wall dispensers.

Craig Doerksen, HSC divisional director of facility management and maintenance services, said hospital maintenance workers came up with a design to lock up sanitizer dispensers to stop people from stealing the one-litre bags from inside. Police say people are misusing sanitizer by adding salt to it and then drinking the liquid, which poses serious health risks. "Theft has been a big issue," said Doerksen. "We've been tracking that."

The hospital has between 150 to 175 dispensers in common areas like elevator lobbies and entrances, he said, as well as an estimated 400 dispensers in more private areas like patient rooms and clinic offices.

The trial project will focus on padlocking 20 to 25 of the highest-targeted dispensers in public areas so officials can see if they can stem thefts. It costs between \$25 to \$40 to modify each dispenser.

"It's theft of property. While it may not be viewed as high-value property, nonetheless, it is theft," he said.

"It's unfortunately a product that can be misused."

Police said the growth of hand-sanitizer abuse came in the wake of the H1N1 flu virus last April when the dispensers suddenly became ubiquitous. However, Doerksen said, in early 2009 the hospital had already started installing the 150-plus public dispensers before H1N1 hit. But locking up the sanitizer might not solve the theft issue, said Doerksen.

"If we lock the containers up, that might just mean the person kicks the whole thing off the wall and steals the product anyways, and now I have a broken wall to fix in addition to a dispenser."


He said it's unknown why people are taking the sanitizer, but staff haven't found evidence like empty bags around the hospital indicating people are drinking it there.

An HSC spokeswoman said they'll also be introducing signs on some public dispensers that tell people sanitizer is for hand-use only and not for drinking.

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