

It's Time to Move Past Smoke Free Rooms: A Proposal for Standard Hypoallergenic Hotel Rooms

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Short Communication

In 1964 the Surgeon General released the landmark Report on Smoking and Health [1]. The report and subsequent studies linked tobacco with a multitude of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, including cancer, COPD, asthma and heart disease. Dramatic changes took place on every level of society, profoundly affecting the hospitality industry. In the US and Canada, the demands of anti-tobacco forces were at first ridiculed, then awkwardly placated, eventually becoming an expected standard. Since the publication of the 1964 report smoking rates decreased from 43% to 18% of adults [2].

In 2006 the Surgeon General Report on Second Hand Smoke [3] prompted Westin Hotels to announce a chain wide, 100% smoke free hotel policy. This was soon followed by Marriott and all its brands. Soon followed by other brands in the United States and Canada. These policies were implemented voluntarily. Continuing pressure led to five states (as of 4/14/2014); Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota and Wisconsin and nearly 100 municipalities to mandate that hotels be 100% smoke free [4]. Although many countries have smoking bans extending to all indoor public places, including restaurants, workplaces and public transport, hotels are generally not subject to such laws with the exception of Bermuda.

Allergies are major cause of illness in the industrialized world, with 10 to 20% of the population suffering from symptoms induced by respiratory allergy with children and young adults making up a very significant fraction of those affected. As opposed to falling smoking rates, allergy and asthma prevalence is increasing. Asthma now affects between 5 and 10 percent of the population [5,6] with allergy being the most common exacerbating factor. Asthma and allergic diseases are some of the most common reasons for visits to health care providers and emergency rooms, resulting in significant direct and indirect costs [7]. In addition to the economic burden, asthma and allergic diseases significantly impact the quality of life of sufferers [8].

Proper diagnosis of asthma and allergy consists of a thorough history and exam, including lung function and allergy testing [9]. Management typically involves multiple modalities, including environmental modification, pharmacotherapy, immunotherapy and patient education [9]. Good management reduces symptoms; the incidence of co-morbid conditions (such as otitis, and sinusitis), the probability of emergency room visits, hospitalizations and significantly improves the quality of life of patients. Well controlled allergy and asthma patients have normal or near normal functioning, without any limitations on activity [9].

Reducing the medication load while maintaining optimal function is one of the goals of modern allergy and asthma management. Less medication reduces adverse effects and improves patient satisfaction. A reduced total allergen load allows for a reduction in medication

without an increase in symptoms [10]. Effective environmental modification can be implemented as a result of an allergy evaluation performed by an experienced specialist.

Exposing patients to and unexpected increase in allergen load can tip the therapeutic balance. Travel can commonly lead to such an event, resulting in potentially unpleasant or even grave consequences.

The availability of suitably modified, hypoallergenic hotel rooms provides allergic travelers with a healthy environment. Hotels reduce total room aeroallergen loads by reducing the concentrations of pollen, animal dander, mold spores and dust mites. Fragrance free, hypoallergenic bath and body products do the same for the skin of sensitive travelers.

While it is not reasonable to expect all room allergen levels to be reduced to 0%, simple measures can result in hypoallergenic rooms able to maintain the well-being of the majority of allergic travelers and offer a safe environment during particularly high pollen/mold spore days.

The negative effects of tobacco smoke exposure are well known. To the non-smoker, the smell of stale tobacco smoke is immediately apparent and can prompt the traveler to seek another room. Other than the unpleasant smell there are no serious, immediate health effects. In the case of an allergic/asthmatic traveler, there are no specific olfactory clues to the previous occupants or presence of potential allergic triggers. The negative effects can take minutes or hours to develop. A few sneezes, soon after entering a room can turn into a full blown, life threatening asthma attack in the middle of the night.

At this time about 250 hotels in the USA and Canada have specifically modified hypoallergenic rooms. The majority are modified by commercial services such as PURE. In 2010 Hyatt hotels announced it is modifying 3 to 5% of their hotel rooms (working with PURE) to meet hypoallergenic standards. This translates to 2000 rooms in 125 properties across the US, Canada and the Caribbean. Other, individual hotels have made significant efforts to provide their clients with such accommodations. In Europe ECARF (European Center for Allergy Research Foundation) guided modifications being implemented, mainly in Germany. In addition to hotels which modify rooms to provide hypoallergenic accommodations, there are a significant number of hotels which already have them by virtue of their room design, without being aware of it, and therefore without promoting them to allergic travelers.

The growing wave of interest in "natural" and "organic" products ranging from foods to bedding has created a significant amount of confusion between the meaning of "natural", "organic" and "hypoallergenic". With the "hypoallergenic" being used interchangeably with "organic" and "natural". For example, the use of

“organic cotton” bedding as a good alternative to “synthetic” bedding. Neither has anything to do with the hypoallergenic nature of the pillows or blankets which still contains dust mite proteins. Ionic air filters are used in certain rooms to provide “clean air”, while generating ozone which is an airway irritant and contraindicated in asthmatics. Plant materials in “Organic and natural” bath and body products can be more harmful to eczema sufferers than standard products. A website, AllerPassMD lists and rates hotels based on their suitability to the needs of allergic and athletic travelers. The information on the site is “filtered” by a trained specialist to reduce the confusion and provide allergen specific information. At this time the site has approximately 1200 listed facilities. For comparison, Tripadvisor lists approximately 500,000 hotels.

The modifications needed to create hypoallergenic hotel rooms are simple, inexpensive and can be carried out as a part of the standard renovation rotation of a hotel. The minimum suggested modifications for a hypoallergenic room:

1. Well maintained, filtered, individual climate control system (pollen, mold, dust mites).
2. Rooms on ground floor are not suitable (unless over a well-ventilated space) (mold, dust mites).
3. Dust mite covers on mattress and pillow. Sheets washed in very hot water. (mold, dust mites).
4. No feather bedding. (Feathers).
5. Glass or plastic bath/shower enclosures. No floor mats. (if curtains: wash in very hot water with bleach every 2-3 days) (mold).
6. No leaks; windows, plumbing, air conditioning. (mold, dust mites).
7. Fragrance free, hypoallergenic bath and body products (available on request) (skin).
8. No Wall to wall carpet (or short pile) (dust mite, mold, animal dander's).
9. Smoke free (nonspecific irritant).
10. Plant free (especially grasses and trees). (pollen, mold).

The above is by no means an exhaustive list of possible modifications. There is plenty of room for individual hotels to distinguish themselves by doing more. Reason and cooperation rather than confrontation and legislation are the most efficient way to satisfy the needs of the allergic/asthmatic traveler without unduly burdening

the hospitality industry. However, it's worth remembering that as of 1992, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) [11] Section 504 is interpreted to pertain to people with Asthma and Allergies, ensuring full access to all facilities, programs and services, including hotel rooms.

The need for hypoallergenic hotel rooms is real. Their availability can result in significant health benefits to allergic travelers, improve their quality of life and result in substantial good will and marketing advantages to the hotel. The increasing prevalence of asthma and allergy along with the availability of simple and inexpensive measures to create suitable rooms makes it a perfect time to implement the standard across the industry.

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