MEDICAL WASTE: SEGREGATION AND REDUCTION

Medical waste experts recommend that any waste management strategy begin with an emphasis on segregation and reduction, rather than a choice of treatment technologies. Since hospital waste is composed of many different types of waste, each requiring different handling, segregation is the key to designing a system that safeguards worker health, minimizes costs, and minimizes environmental impacts.

Why Segregate?

* Infectious waste can cost five times as much to treat as regular, non-infectious waste. Since 85% of the waste from hospitals falls in the latter category, segregation allows a facility to minimize the cost of treating infectious waste by minimizing the amount of infectious waste.

* Sharps are dangerous to hospital personnel, waste handlers, and scavengers. To reduce the possibility of infection, handling of sharps must be minimized and they must be contained in puncture-proof containers from point of use to final disposal.

* Hazardous waste such as mercury, chemotherapy drugs and nuclear medicine must be separated and dealt with appropriately to avoid large-scale environmental contamination.

* Segregation allows the recycling of paper, cardboard, metals, etc. which saves money and reduces the environmental burden of increased demand.

* Segregation also allows the identification of problematic parts of the waste stream e.g. non-recyclables which can then be minimized through purchasing.

Why Reduce?

* Reduction is important at three levels: reduction of waste toxicity by not purchasing toxics; volume reduction means less handling of waste and therefore greater worker safety; and volume reduction also lowers disposal costs.

* Hospitals are a major source of environmental mercury. Eliminating the use of mercury products in hospitals would greatly reduce the incidence of mercury poisoning.

* PVC production and disposal are two of the major sources of dioxin. Hospitals use large quantities of PVC, for which good, non-toxic alternatives exist. Eliminating PVC in hospitals would significantly lower levels of dioxin production.

* Substituting reusable for disposable items with the exception of syringes and needles reduces waste volume and costs without affecting patient care or infection rates.

ESSENTIAL ACTION
PO Box 19405, Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel (+1) 202.387.8030; Fax (+1) 202.234.5176
action@essential.org        www.EssentialAction.org