



WHO Policies for the Management of Health Care Wastes (HCW)

The new WHO policies on “Sound management of health care wastes” and on “Mercury in the health sector” were presented by the WHO facilitators, and discussed. Participants took note of the proposed step-by-step approach, adopted in both policy documents, to prioritize the reduction, segregation and sound handling and treatment of all medical wastes in the immediate term and to solely promote non incineration systems and mercury-free medical devices, in the long term.

5.1 Policy for better HCW management

The WHO guiding principles for health care waste management (HCWM) are based on preventing the health risks associated with exposure to health care waste for both health workers and the public, by promoting environmentally sound management policies for health care wastes. WHO is supporting global efforts to reduce the amount of noxious emissions released into the atmosphere to reduce disease and defer the onset of global change. Thereby, WHO is also in line with the principles underlying the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and the Basel Convention.

With a view to contributing to reduce the exposure to toxic pollutants associated with the combustion process, through the promotion of appropriate practices for high temperature incineration, WHO’s strategy for

sound management of health care wastes is divided in three strategic steps:

Short-term

- ◆ Production of all syringes/components made of the same plastic to facilitate recycling;
- ◆ Selection of PVC-free medical devices;
- ◆ Identification and development of recycling options wherever possible (e.g.: for plastic, glass, etc.);
- ◆ Research on and promotion of new technology or alternatives to small-scale incineration;
- ◆ Support countries in the development and implementation of legislation, national plan, policies on sound management of health care waste

Medium-term

- ◆ Further efforts to reduce the number of unnecessary injections and the amount of hazardous health care waste that needs to be treated;
- ◆ Research into the health effect of chronic exposure to low levels of dioxin and furan;
- ◆ Risk assessment to compare the health risks associated with (1) incineration and (2) exposure to health care waste.
- ◆ Support countries to develop national guidance manual for a sound management of health care waste

Long-term

- ◆ Effective, scaled-up promotion of non-incineration technologies for the final disposal of health care wastes to prevent the disease burden from (a) unsafe health care waste management and (b) exposure to dioxins and furans.
- ◆ Promotion of the principles of environmentally sound management of health care waste as set out in the UN Conventions;
- ◆ Support to allocate human and financial resources to safely manage health care waste in countries

Examples of Non burn technologies for health care wastes

- ◆ Chemical disinfection of infectious plastics at the point of generation or at a central location;
- ◆ Microwaving of infectious plastics;
- ◆ Hydroclaving of the health care facilities for treated infectious plastics and metal sharps.
- ◆ Sharps pit used as the final disposal option;
- ◆ Encapsulation of sharps from health care facilities;
- ◆ Plastic reprocessing: after treatment, the shredded plastic from syringes is collected by the formal or informal sector for material recovery;



- ◆ Metal reprocessing: smelting of metals as one of the final disposal options.

Source: "Safe Management of Bio-medical Sharps waste in India", WHO SEARO, 2004

5.2 Policy on mercury

WHO's policy on "Mercury in the health sector" proposes to work in collaboration with countries to ensure that safe handling procedures be instituted to minimize and eliminate patient, occupational, and community exposures. Proper procedures should include spill-clean-up response, educational programs, protective gear, appropriate waste storage containment, staff training, and engineered storage facilities. Countries that have access to affordable alternatives should develop and implement plans to reduce the use of mercury equipment and replace them with mercury-free alternatives.

WHO encourages countries to progressively reduce the import and sale of mercury containing health care devices and mercury use in health care settings. WHO also supports efforts towards developing global multilateral environmental agreements to this end. Countries need to make sure that the recovered mercury equipment is not pushed back in the supply chain. In the long term, WHO supports a ban for use of mercury containing devices and effectively promote the use of mercury-free alternatives.

