

Preface

The improper management of wastes generated in health care facilities can severely affect the health of caregivers, patients and individual members of the community. It also has the adverse impacts on the environment. In addition, pollution from inadequate treatment of waste can indirectly affect the health of the community.

Throughout the world, an estimated 16 billion injections are administered annually. Needles and syringes that are not disposed of properly pose a grave hazard to public health due to the risk of injury and infection and of the opportunities for re-use.

Worldwide, 8-16 million hepatitis B, 2.3 - 4.7 million hepatitis C and 80 000 - 160 000 HIV infections are estimated to occur yearly from re-used unsterilised syringes and needles. The re-use of disposable syringes and needles for injections is particularly common in certain developing countries.

Additional health hazards occur from scavenging on waste disposal sites and manual sorting of the waste at health-care facilities. These practices are common in many regions of the world. The waste handlers are at immediate risk of needle-stick injuries and other exposures to toxic or infectious materials.

The safe disposal of used needles and syringes and other infectious sharps should therefore be seen as a critical component of any health care waste management programme, if infection is to be prevented.

Where possible, the management of wastes from immunization activities should be integrated into existing health care waste management systems. Furthermore, it is essential that health care waste management is accepted as an integral part of health care by all those concerned.

Auto-disable syringes virtually eliminate the risk of patient-to-patient transmission of infectious diseases with blood borne pathogens (such as hepatitis B, C and HIV) because they cannot be re-used. Their increasing use in immunization services worldwide is extremely encouraging.

Despite the significant advantages of using single-use syringes, their disposal, in a safe, cost-effective and environmentally-friendly manner, particularly in the context of mass immunization campaigns, poses a significant challenge. While a number of solutions exist, it is important that countries establish a Health Care Waste Management system appropriate to local circumstances.

Bio-medical waste whether generated at small primary health centres, rural clinics or in larger facilities, can be managed where adequate well-operated infrastructures exist. However, where resources are limited, small-scale incinerators are being used as an interim solution in less developed and transitional countries. These incinerators often operate at low temperatures and this may lead to the emission of highly toxic pollutants such as dioxins and furans.

The absence of proper waste management, lack of awareness about the health hazards from bio-medical wastes, insufficient financial and human resources and poor control of waste disposal are the most common problems connected with health-care wastes.

In view of the various health risks posed by ill-managed health care wastes, especially sharps, WHO has prepared and issued a new policy paper indicating the Organisation's strategy in the immediate, the mid- and long-term to boost the reduction of burden of disease attributable to infectious wastes. A copy of the Policy paper is attached to this report.

Though Government commitment and support is needed for long-term improvement of the situation, although immediate action can be taken locally. In the South-East Asia region only five Member States have policy guidelines on Health Care Waste Management and only two have enacted specific legislations.

Because inadequate waste management drastically reduces the overall benefits of health care, there has been an increasing demand for WHO to take an active role in promoting safe health-care waste management. I hope that this report documenting thirteen success stories from India, will help in addressing this challenge.

I am confident that the commitment of health policy makers the Member States in the South-East Asia region, active participation of the experts from key health institutions and the technical support of WHO, we will be able to overcome the current bottlenecks and develop sustainable strategies for the safe management of medical sharps waste.



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