Safe management of wastes from health-care activities
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Geneva
1999
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In pursuing their aims of reducing health problems and eliminating potential risks to people’s health, health-care services inevitably create waste that may itself be hazardous to health. The waste produced in the course of health-care activities carries a higher potential for infection and injury than any other type of waste. Wherever it is generated, safe and reliable methods for its handling are therefore essential. Inadequate and inappropriate handling of health-care waste may have serious public health consequences and a significant impact on the environment. Sound management of health-care waste is thus a crucial component of environmental health protection.

In both the short term and the long term, the actions involved in implementing effective health-care waste management programmes require multisectoral cooperation and interaction at all levels. Policies should be generated and coordinated globally, and the management practices implemented locally. Establishment of a national policy and a legal framework, training of personnel, and raising public awareness are essential elements of successful health-care waste management. Improved public awareness of the problem is vital in encouraging community participation in generating and implementing policies and programmes. Management of health-care waste should thus be put into a systematic, multi-faceted framework, and should become an integral feature of health-care services.

To achieve this aim, the World Health Organization, together with WHO’s European Centre for Environment and Health in Nancy, France, set up an international working group to produce a practical guide, addressing particularly the problems of health-care waste management in developing countries. The group included representatives of the private sector involved in waste management activities and members of the public. This handbook, the result of their efforts, is intended to be comprehensive yet concise, “user-friendly”, and oriented towards practical management of health-care waste in local facilities. It provides guidelines for the responsible national and local administrators and is the first publication to offer globally relevant advice on the management of health-care waste. The guidelines complement and supplement those produced in different regions in the past.

WHO strongly encourages the widespread implementation of these guidelines and is ready to assist users in adapting them to national settings. This book has been prepared as a practical response to the need for improved health-care waste management, especially in developing countries. Continuing efforts are being made to refine this response and feedback from users of the handbook would be appreciated. Comments and suggestions based on experience of its use may be sent to
Department of Protection of the Human Environment, World Health Organization, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland.

WHO has also produced a teacher’s guide to complement this handbook (Prüss A, Townend WK, Teacher’s guide: management of wastes from health-care activities; unpublished document WHO/EOS/98.6), which may be obtained from Marketing and Dissemination, World Health Organization, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland. The guide is designed as the basis for a three-day training course and contains overhead slides, hand-outs, exercises, illustrations, and training recommendations.

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Eric Giroult
Philip Rushbrook
Acknowledgements

The valuable contributions made by the following individuals to the production of this handbook are gratefully acknowledged:

C. Bartone, World Bank, Washington, DC, USA (reviewer)
A.D. Bhide, National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, Nagpur, India (reviewer)
M. Castegnaro, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France (author and reviewer)
E. Cole, DynCorp, Durham, NC, USA (author and reviewer)
J. Christen, Swiss Centre for Development Cooperation in Technology and Management (SKAT), St Gallen, Switzerland (reviewer)
G. Ducel, Fondation Hygie, Geneva, Switzerland (reviewer)
B.R. Durand, Ministry of Health, Paris, France (author and reviewer)
M. Giannoni, Bonnard & Gardel, Geneva, Switzerland (author and reviewer)
A. Gur, WHO Centre for Environmental Health Activities, Amman, Jordan (reviewer)
S. Hansel, Central Pharmacy, Lapeyronnie Hospital, Montpellier, France (author)
P. Harteman, Public Health Laboratory, Nancy, France (author and reviewer)
H. Kitawaki, Faculty of Regional Development Studies, University of Toyo, Toyo, Japan (resource person)
G. Linsley, Division of Radiation and Waste Safety, International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna, Austria (author)
M. Manciaux, University of Nancy, Nancy, France (resource person)
S.T.W. Miaw, Division of Radiation and Waste Safety, International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna, Austria (author)
H. Ogawa, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Manila, Philippines (reviewer)
J.C. Pospisilik, WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, New Delhi, India (reviewer)
G. Reybrouck, University Hospital, Louvain, Belgium (author)
A. Roth, International Solid Waste Association, Netherlands (reviewer and resource person)
D. Saw, waste management consultant, Penang, Malaysia (author and reviewer)
S. Shirato, Japanese Society for Medical Waste Research, Tokyo, Japan (resource person)
F. Siem Tjam, Department of Health Systems, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland (reviewer)
M.H. Sportouch, Central Pharmacy, Lapeyronnie Hospital, Montpellier, France (author)
C. Struck, Ingenius, Berlin, Germany (reviewer)
E. Tikhomirov, Department of Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland (reviewer)
M. Wilson, Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, USA (resource person)
Wong Sze-Pong, WHO Regional Office for Africa, Brazzaville, Congo (reviewer)
F. Zepeda, WHO Regional Office for the Americas/Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Washington, DC, USA (reviewer)

The World Health Organization thanks all institutions and individuals who have provided information and helped to make this handbook possible; particular thanks are due for the contributions made by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Solid Waste Association, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Japanese Society for Research on Medical Waste, and the Swiss Corporation for Appropriate Technology.