

Healthcare Waste in the Pacific

PacWaste (Pacific Hazardous Waste) is a four year project funded by the European Union and implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to improve regional hazardous waste management across the Pacific.

A major component of the €7.85 million project is to take action to improve regional healthcare waste management across 14 Pacific island countries and Timor Leste.



What is healthcare waste?

Left: Incinerating healthcare waste is better for the environment and public health than open burning.

Right: Disposing of used sharps in proper containers helps protect people from needlestick injuries.

Healthcare waste is the range of waste generated by hospitals and health clinics. While it is similar to domestic waste, it also contains a proportion of hazardous waste, which requires specific treatment. Healthcare waste is hazardous because it has the potential to be infectious to humans, cause injury or pollute the environment. Correct treatment and disposal is therefore important to protect people and the natural surroundings.

Examples of healthcare waste include:

- **infectious waste** – biological and pathological waste for example, swabs, body parts and cultures
- **chemical waste** – such as laboratory chemicals
- **sharps** – syringes, infusion sets, scalpels, blades
- **pharmaceutical products** – expired, unused or unwanted.

Impacts of poor healthcare waste management

Poor healthcare waste management can result in:

- sharps-inflicted injuries (for example, needlestick injuries)
- poisoning and pollution of air, water or soil through:
 - the release of pharmaceutical products (antibiotics and cytotoxic drugs)
 - toxic elements or compounds (for example, mercury or dioxins that are released during incineration).

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Healthcare waste and handlers

Healthcare waste in the Pacific region is increasing in volume as populations grow and medical services expand. Those exposed to healthcare waste are more at risk of injury and negative impacts. This includes waste handlers and healthcare workers at hospitals and health clinics. To protect workers, training and education is an important part of effective healthcare waste management, as well as the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, masks and appropriate footwear.

In developing countries, scavenging at waste disposal sites is common practice. People sorting through waste are exposed to health risks and injuries and this often includes children.

Healthcare waste segregation

Best practice healthcare waste management starts with waste segregation. Waste segregation is the separation of the different types of waste at the point of generation, for example, disposing a needle into a sharps container and the plastic packaging into a general waste bin.

The display of signage, use of colour-coded bins and liners and regular staff training all contribute to proper waste segregation and overall improved healthcare waste management.

Healthcare waste treatment

There are different healthcare waste treatment and disposal options, each with different maintenance and operational requirements, cost and environmental considerations.

These include:

- incineration
- landfill burial
- autoclaving (steam based disinfection)
- chemical disinfection.

How will PacWaste address healthcare waste?

Information about the current state of healthcare waste management has been collected from 14 participating countries across the Pacific region as well as from Timor Leste.

This information will help identify and prioritise future actions to assist Pacific islands in improving healthcare waste management and better protect their communities.

PacWaste will also take similar action on two other hazardous waste types identified as priorities for the Pacific – asbestos and E-waste.



High temperature incineration minimises harmful dioxins and furans from entering the air.



Using proper equipment and clothing helps protect people who are handling healthcare waste.



The improper disposal of healthcare waste can harm children accessing dump sites.



Regular maintenance of equipment is critical to sustainable healthcare waste management.

Find out more

For more information about healthcare waste and PacWaste go to www.sprep.org/pacwaste

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