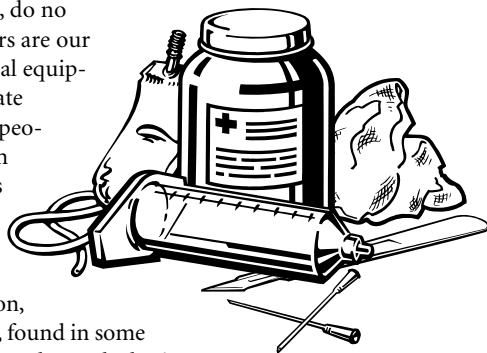


When Health Care Does Harm

The Hippocratic Oath promises to “first, do no harm.” So whether health care providers are our family doctor or a manufacturer of hospital equipment, they have a responsibility to eliminate practices that harm the environment and people’s health. Yet unfortunately, some health care products and waste disposal practices can actually contribute to pollution and disease.

The incineration of health care waste is a leading source of hazardous air pollution, particularly mercury and dioxins. Mercury, found in some thermometers and blood pressure devices, can harm the brain and nervous system. And dioxin—created from the burning of waste that contains chlorine—is linked to reduced fertility, immune system disorders, and many forms of cancer.



DID YOU KNOW...?

- * The amount of mercury in just one fever thermometer is enough to contaminate fish in a 20-acre lake.
- * In the United States, as many as one in eight children are born at risk of learning disabilities because their mothers ate fish contaminated with mercury.

- * The manufacturing and incineration of medical devices made of vinyl plastic (also known as PVC) creates dioxin. Health care products made of PVC also contain the phthalate DEHP, a chemical that may cause birth defects of the reproductive system.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

☛ **Health Care Without Harm** (www.noharm.org) is an international coalition of 427 organizations in 52 countries that works to transform the health care industry so that it’s no longer a source of harm to people and the environment.

☛ **Hospitals for a Healthy Environment** (www.h2e-online.org) offers useful tools to help hospitals in the U.S. reduce their environmental impact and sponsors a listserv where health care professionals can share resources.

☛ **CleanMed** (www.cleanmed.org) is an annual health care conference on environmentally preferable products and green buildings.

SUCCESS STORIES

❖ Today, thousands of hospitals are learning how to reduce both the amount and the toxicity of what they throw out—in part by paying closer attention to their purchasing practices.

❖ In the United States, more than 1,400 medical institutions have pledged to be mercury-free by 2005. Major U.S. chain drug stores like CVS, Kmart, Safeway, Rite-Aid, and Wal-Mart no longer sell mercury fever thermometers.

❖ Government agencies in several countries—including the U.S., European Union, and Japan—have issued warnings that vinyl medical products containing the phthalate DEHP may harm some patients, particularly boys and pregnant women.

❖ Leading health care institutions around the world, including the Vienna Hospital Association and Kaiser Permanente, are taking steps to minimize their use of vinyl products.

❖ Medical waste incinerators are closing around the world due to health concerns. In the U.S., some 4,800 medical waste incinerators have closed since 1994. Ireland, the Philippines, and the Canadian province of Ontario have all switched to safer non-burn technologies for nearly all medical waste disposal.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND OTHERS:

Spend a month checking out the type of plastic used in everything you buy, including the product’s packaging. Don’t buy any items labeled “3” (in the U.S.) or PVC, or that don’t specify the type of plastic being used.



SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ Inventory your house for products containing mercury or vinyl. If your fever thermometer has a silver filling, carefully dispose of it as hazardous waste and buy a safer digital thermometer.
- ✓ Replace household products containing vinyl with safer alternatives, including food containers made of non-vinyl plastic or glass, canvas or nylon shower curtains, cloth car seats, and toys made of non-vinyl plastic or wood. (In the U.S., a “3” inside the recycling symbol indicates the presence of vinyl.)
- ✓ Don’t burn your garbage and yard waste, and minimize your fireplace use—these activities add to the dioxin problem.
- ✓ Through careful purchasing and recycling, try to minimize the amount of garbage you throw away.
- ✓ Ask your local hospital to stop using mercury-containing thermometers or other products. In the U.S., encourage the facility to join Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, a national effort to reduce waste and eliminate mercury from health care waste.
- ✓ Inform hospital staff about government warnings about DEHP-containing medical devices. Recommend a speaker, present information to committee meetings, or share case studies of other hospitals that are going DEHP-free.
- ✓ Don’t burn it! Find out if your hospital is minimizing, segregating, and recycling its waste. If the facility is burning waste on-site or sending it away to be burned, encourage safer alternative technologies.