Ever Peek In Your "Red Bag"?

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Medical waste management can be a significant expense for most surgical practices. I regularly visit offices where staff members place non-regulated items in with medical waste, thereby driving up operating costs. Additionally, I see a considerable number of offices placing items which are regulated (but not as bio-hazardous waste) in with the standard medical waste.

The three principle categories of medical waste include: infectious, pathological and sharps.

Infectious wastes include items "saturated" with blood or other potentially infectious material (OPIM). OPIM includes saliva. Contaminated items may include gauze, cotton rolls, patient bibs, etc. Items are considered "saturated" if they: drip blood or OPIM, or if blood or OPIM drips when they are compressed, or if dried or caked blood or OPIM flakes off of them. Items which are only stained with blood or moist with saliva and not saturated, soaked or caked can be discarded with regular trash. Only place into a "red bag" items which are "saturated". This will prevent you from filling these containers with materials which do not require special handling and will save you money.
Some states define "pathologic waste" as a unique subset of infectious waste. This would include bodily tissue from biopsy, periodontal surgery, etc. which is discarded and not sent for pathologic examination. These wastes should be placed into the "red bag" along with the other infectious waste. Extracted teeth should similarly be deposited here unless they contain amalgam restorations. Many states have implemented laws governing the disposal of amalgam and federal regulations are coming. While oral surgeons are generally exempt from requirements to install amalgam separators, they should still place extracted teeth containing amalgam into specially designed containers and send them for recycling on an annual basis. This would not only be in compliance with ADA Best Management Practices for the handling and disposal of this waste, but would help to keep your practice compliant with state requirements whose interpretation can often be confusing.

The final medical waste category are sharps. These include: scalpels, needles, disposable syringes, empty anesthetic carpules, etc. Sharps must be stored in puncture resistant and properly labeled containers.

Under federal guidelines all of the above medical wastes must leave your office within 7 days of the container becoming full. Check with your own state, however, as many have accumulation time limits which are shorter than the federal guidelines.
In addition to teeth containing amalgam being discarded in the red bag I also frequently see pharmaceutical wastes having the same fate. The proper disposal of pharmaceutical wastes has become a "hot button" issue in recent years. Numerous studies by the Federal EPA have documented the presence of various pharmaceutical chemicals and their metabolic by-products in surface and ground waters throughout the United States. As many of these compounds have serious health ramifications even in the parts per billion range, proper disposal is becoming increasingly important. Some states now have laws in place regulating such disposal.

Pharmaceutical wastes may include: partially used anesthetic carpules, transdermal medication patches, partially used or expired medications for parenteral, IM or IV sedation including sections of the IV tubing which were in direct contact with the medication and other expired medications such as nitroglycerine tablets, injectable epinephrine, bronchodilators, ammonia inhalants, injectable histamine blockers as well as any others be they in tablet, capsule or injectable form.

These wastes should be placed in specially designed and color coded (white with blue top or cream colored with purple top) containers and sent for incineration to certified facilities which utilize specific emission controls.

The most effective and cost-efficient waste management services are provided by companies who limit their model solely to the dental profession. By understanding the
unique needs of your office, affordable, monitored, mail-back services tailored to the amount of waste you generate can be provided. This "right-sized" approach can yield significant savings for your practice. Moreover, by tracking your waste streams, notifying you of when it's time to recycle and assisting in the completion of government documentation, a good waste management company can make compliance easy for both you and your staff.

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DRNA is an ASI approved waste management vendor.

For more information on waste management services contact DRNA at 1-800-360-1001 or on the web at www.DRNA.com