Reducing the Costs of Medical Waste Disposal

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There is an old adage that says "it's not about what you make but rather about what you keep". Nowhere is this more true than in a dental practice where medical waste disposal can be a significant expense. While this topic may not be glamorous or cutting edge it should be noted that proper waste management can actually help your practice grow, attract new patients and improve your bottom line. In business I don't know of anything more glamorous than that!

Proper waste management can yield significant savings both direct and indirect. These savings can then be used to buy the new technologies, purchase advertising or take the continuing education courses you want to take which allow you to grow your practice.

I regularly visit offices where staff members place non-regulated items in with medical waste, thereby driving up operating costs. I also see offices that generate very little waste, receiving and paying for monthly or quarterly waste pick-ups of nearly empty containers. If you don't periodically review your waste handling and the associated costs you are probably grossly overspending in this area.

Understanding Disposal Requirements

- Bio-hazardous wastes include items "saturated" with blood or other potentially infectious material (OPIM). OPIM includes saliva. Contaminated items, to be placed in special containers, 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 "red bag" containers with materials that do not require special handling, thereby saving you money.

- Teeth without amalgam, human surgery tissue, etc. *must* also placed in these containers.
- Sharps are a subset of bio-hazardous waste and also require special disposal. Sharps include: scalpels, needles, disposable syringes, empty anesthetic carpules, orthodontic wires, metal matrix bands, etc. Sharps *must* be stored in puncture resistant and properly labeled containers.

Under federal guidelines all of the above bio-hazardous wastes must leave your office within 7 days of the container becoming full. Check with your own state, however, as some states have accumulation time limits which are shorter than the federal guidelines.

**Waste Disposal Options**

The most effective and cost-efficient waste management services are provided by companies, like DRNA, 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. Savings of both money and time - and you thought waste management was just about trash!
Dr. Frost is Vice President for Clinical and Scientific Affairs at Dental Recycling North America, Inc. (DRNA). He is a dentist and an epidemiologist / public health specialist who consults with dentists and lectures nationally on regulatory issues facing the profession. He is the author of numerous articles and books on these topics.

For more information regarding this topic contact DRNA at 1-800-360-1001 Ext. 17 or on the web at www.DRNA.com.