Waste management matters
Louise Finn discusses the high level of medical waste in the UK

W e’re all aware of waste, whether it’s binned into our own household wheelie bins or litter dropped in the street.

However, while an empty crisp packet may be unsightly, it’s unlikely to trigger an epidemic. Household waste accounts for only one tonne in every seven produced in the UK, and among the commercial waste is a significant quantity of ‘hazardous’ waste from healthcare premises which must be disposed of with great care to eliminate any risk to the public or the environment. As responsible dental professionals we need to understand and observe the regulations concerning both the biodegradable and inorganic waste generated by our practices, so as to ensure maximising our practice’s waste product footprint.

The optimum waste solution is of course recycling, with organic material the prime candidate to attempt to reduce atmospherically damaging methane emissions, but in many instances Government regulations prohibit this option for both medical detritus and potentially contaminated obsolete equipment.

The Environment Agency has designed a website where businesses are listed according to sector and their responsibilities, regulations concerning both the commercial waste is a legal requirement, and any failure in this regard can lead to prosecution.

Healthcare waste which is destined for landfill must be pre-treated (washed and disinfected) before tipping, and when this is not practical or treatment being replaced by upgrades, websites such as ‘Free Cycle’ have emerged as an advertising medium for unwanted items and other household electrical goods whose working life is not yet exhausted.

Dentists seeking to dispose of unwanted or superseded electrical equipment have particular problems. Although recycling is the ideal way to eliminate liability to landfill tax, this is not always practical, and it can seem profligate, even immoral, to scrap a perfectly functioning, sophisticated machine in favour of the latest version or simply because of a policy change.

While there may be occasions when approaching an overseas dental charity represents a satisfying solution, there will be others when for fiscal, financial or logistical considerations this is not appropriate - and the guidelines for safe disposal take no account of the practice budget!

Many practices, prudently taking heed of the present economic climate, are today purging their waste product footprint.

References


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