Waste management matters

Louise Finn discusses the high level of medical waste in the UK

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

However, while an empty crisp packet may be unnoticed, 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, seeking to minimise 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.

There is a significant quantity of hazardous waste that must be disposed of with care.

Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) is defined as being any by-products of their commercial or other activities which pose a potential risk to humans.

Individual businesses each have a ‘duty of care’ to safely manage their own ‘controlled waste’, defined as being any by-products of their commercial or other activities which pose a potential risk to humans.

Controlled waste must be handled by an authorised contractor, and its source must be traceable, so it’s vital to maintain and retain the paperwork covering waste transfer whenever it leaves the practice. Keeping waste disposal records 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Dentists seeking to dispose of unwanted or superseded electrical equipment have particular problems.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 profitable to dispose of electrical equipment through the second hand market.

Many practices, prudently taking heed of the present economic climate, are today purchasing the latest version or simply 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.

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