Waste management matters

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

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 health-care 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 defined. Practice Principals and clinicians should already be aware of these, but downloading the relevant protocol is a simple expedient to ensure this awareness is shared by every member of staff and the highest standards of health and safety are maintained in respect of waste throughout the practice.

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Dentists seeking to dispose of unwanted or superseded electrical equipment have particular problems.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, even immoral, to scrap a perfectly functioning, sophisticated machine in favour of the latest version or simply because of a cause of 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 purusing both the environmentally and financially friendly option of upgrading or exchanging equipment through the second hand market. It’s worth remembering that many millions of pounds worth of working dental equipment is scrapped every year, and the 1,500 landfill sites across the UK are filling up fast. They also account for almost a quarter of the nation’s methane emissions, underlining the urgency, as well as the moral imperative, for all of us within the dental industry to dispose of our waste safely and responsibly. After all, the planet belongs to all of us.

References
[1] Guidelines for dentists can be found at www.environment-agency.gov.uk/netregs/...

About the author
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