Issues in Medical Waste Management

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Foreword

During the summer just passed, we witnessed a rash of incidents in which medical wastes washed ashore—from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico, along the Great Lakes, and elsewhere in the Nation. These and other incidents, which were the focus of intense media coverage, drew public attention to issues surrounding the management of medical wastes.

Waste management in general has become a common headline topic. We hear daily about declining landfill capacity, problems in siting new incinerators, and efforts to increase recycling. OTA’s ongoing assessment of municipal solid waste management is addressing these issues.

As part of the assessment, OTA also examined the status of medical waste management in the Nation. OTA held a one-day workshop on July 19, 1988, with hospital, regulatory, and environmental experts to review the initial draft of this background paper and to discuss other areas of interest. The conclusions of those discussions have been incorporated in this paper.

The paper examines the adequacy of current medical waste disposal practices and the potential for human health impacts to occur as a result of such practices. It also addresses the need for additional research and databases, and discusses probable trends in future costs and capacity as new regulations are adopted around the country. Finally, the paper considers the possible need for further Federal involvement in regulating the handling, treatment, storage, and disposal of medical wastes.

OTA is grateful for the input from the workshop participants and other reviewers. The preparation of this paper would have been much more difficult without such support. As with all OTA studies, the content of this paper is the sole responsibility of OTA.

John H. Gibbons
Director
Municipal Solid Waste Advisory Panel

Joseph Sax, Chair
School of Law, University of California

John Bazin
Anheuser-Busch Cos., Inc.

Gordon Boyd
Schillinger, Salerni, and Boyd

Paul Connett
Saint Lawrence University

Randall Curlee
Oak Ridge National Laboratory

Dana Duxbury
Center for Environmental Management
Tufts University

Rodney Edwards
American Paper Institute

Jeffrey Hahn
Ogden Projects, Inc.

Michael Herz
Benjamin Cordozo School of Law

Walter Johnson
St. Paul Metropolitan Waste Control
Commission

Richard Kattar
New England CRInc.

Raymond Naar
General Electric Plastics

Lorie Parker
Seattle Solid Waste Utility

Glenrose Pitt
Private Consultant

Barry Scher
Giant Food, Inc.

Neil Seldman
Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Peter Vardy
Waste Management, Inc.

Irvin White
New York State Energy Research and
Development Authority

NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the workshop participants, advisory panel members, and reviewers. These participants do not, however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this background paper. OTA assumes full responsibility for the background paper and the accuracy of its contents.
Medical Waste Workshop Participants

Frank Cross
Cross/Tessitore & Associates

Lawrence Doucet
Doucet & Mainka

Allen Dusault
Massachusetts Department of Environmental Quality and Engineering

Dieter Groschel
University of Virginia Medical Center

Susan Harwood
Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Christopher Haynes/Eugene Mainer
Decom Medical Waste Systems

John Joyner
Consumat Systems

Stephen Kaufman
Massachusetts General Hospital

Ode Keil
Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations

C.C. Lee
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Edward Londres
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

John Manuel
Ontario Ministry of the Environment

John McVicar
Centers for Disease Control

Ray Morrison
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Robert Peters
Biomedical Waste Treatment Council

William Rutala
University of North Carolina School of Medicine

Robert Sheehan
Medi-Gen

Robert Spurgin
Browning-Ferris Industries

Barbara Stank
New England Deaconist Hospital

Jacqueline Warren
Natural Resources Defense Council

Howard Wensley
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Denise Zabinski
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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