



Position Statement

Health care waste: role of nurses and nursing

ICN Position:

The nursing profession worldwide recognises the vital role the natural environment plays in global health and acknowledges the real threat posed by health care waste.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes all nurses have a duty to reduce/eliminate the negative impact of health care waste on individuals, communities and the environment. ICN and national nurses associations (NNAs), as representative organisations of nurses and nursing, have the responsibility to direct clinical and policy decisions with regard to health care waste.

ICN supports initiatives to reduce the harmful impact of health care waste, including:

- Purchase decisions that favour recycled paper and products, reduce the toxicity of products used and the volume of packaging materials.
- Use of the marketplace to develop alternative low-toxicity products, e.g. replacing chlorinated plastics (PVC), latex and mercury.
- Limiting the use of pesticides.
- Waste segregation with strategically placed receptacles to reduce the volume of waste requiring special attention and facilitate the recycling of materials whenever possible.
- Waste treatment choices that minimize toxic disinfectants and sterilants.
- Waste disposal choices that reduce harmful effects of incineration to the maximum extent possible.
- Patient, population and professional education on the impact of environmental pollution.
- Recycling materials whenever possible and without compromising patient safety.

Nurses, as professionals, need to be aware of the consequences of the health care waste produced by the health sector. Nursing organisations need to:

- Define and regulate nursing competencies in environmental health.
- Facilitate nurses' access to continuing education programmes on the subject of health care waste.
- Apply a precautionary approach to product evaluation and selection that protects the environment.
- Advocate for the involvement of direct care nurses in decision-making.

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- Advocate for recycling procedures and waste disposal mechanisms that do not compromise patient safety, including properly labelled containers for waste segregation.
- Strengthen the involvement of nurses in waste-related policy formulation, incorporate environmentally-friendly and safe waste disposal models in nursing curricula and facilitate nurses' access to continuing education programmes on the subject of health care waste.
- Promote the widespread introduction of safe needles, injection safety policies and the auto-disable syringe.
- Encourage the reduction of excessive and unnecessary packaging.
- Facilitate the establishment of waste management regimes in all health institutions.
- Support the introduction of incentives for health workers to incorporate environmentally healthy practices in their professional interventions.
- Develop coalitions with other professions to lobby for safe waste disposal.
- Lobby national governments to ratify UN Conventions on Healthy Environment.

Background

Health care treatment generates millions of tons of health care waste each year. This waste represents a serious risk to the environment if not properly managed and disposed.

Health care waste "includes all the wastes generated by health care activities... activities of diagnosis as well as preventive, curative and palliative treatments in the field of human and veterinary medicine. In other words, all the waste produced by a health care institution (public or private), a health care research facility or a laboratory" (SBC & WHO 2004 p. 8).

The types of health care waste are numerous and have been classified as:

- Infectious waste
- Pathological and anatomical
- Hazardous pharmaceutical waste
- Hazardous chemical waste
- Waste with a high content of heavy metals
- Pressurised containers
- Highly infectious waste
- Genotoxic/cytotoxic
- Radioactive waste

Health care and its technology is a major contributor to the contamination of the world's food, water and air. Mishandled waste created by treating one patient may cause others to get sick. Toxic and infectious wastes pose a serious threat to public health and the health of workers whose jobs expose them to their dangers.

Primary health care, with its focus on the basic determinants of health, acknowledges the key role the environment plays on the health status of individuals, families and communities.

A precautionary approach advocates for preventive measures to be taken to analyse and choose alternatives to potentially harmful products and activities.

Clinical and policy decisions influence the production and disposal of health care waste. The procurement, use and disposal of health care supplies affect the volume, labour intensity and cost of the resulting health care waste disposal.

Nurses in clinical care are producers of health care waste and are active participants in waste disposal procedures. Nurses in management positions develop policies that deal with the procurement of supplies as well as the production and elimination of health care waste. Educational institutions (nursing schools) also generate large amounts of equipment waste which must be effectively managed, serving as role models for others.

References:

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Health Care Management: Handbook for Nurses. International Council of Nurses, 2009
Secretariat of the Basle Convention & World Health Organization (2004), *Preparation of national health care waste management plans in sub-Saharan countries* [guidance manual], accessed 17 July 2007, www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/medicalwaste/en/guidancemanual.pdf

Adopted in 1998

Reviewed and revised in 2004 and 2010

Related ICN Positions:

- Universal access to clean water
- Nurses, climate change and health
- Occupational health and safety for nurses

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.