

**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460**

OFFICE OF  
SOLID WASTE AND EMERGENCY  
RESPONSE

Ted Ding, Executive Director  
Beautiful Taiwan Foundation  
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Taipei, 106 - Taiwan

Dear Mr. Ding:

Thank you for your recent letter of April 12, 1996 to Administrator Carol Browner requesting information on medical waste management in the United States, specifically as it relates to beach contamination. I am enclosing a document ("Questionnaire on Hospital Wastes Management") that was prepared by our Agency for foreign countries interested in U.S. medical waste regulations. I hope this document, which is our Agency's response to a survey developed by the World Health Organization, will be useful to you in your project. It is important to note that at this time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not have regulations specific to medical waste. This waste stream is primarily regulated by State governments.

In your letter, you specifically ask about management of beach contamination from medical waste. As background, in 1987, approximately 25 miles of New Jersey shoreline were closed in late May and 50 miles in mid-August because various types of debris washed up, including some medical waste. In 1988, New York beaches were closed after debris washed up on approximately 50 miles of shoreline. Medical waste also was found on some shores of the Great Lakes States and in other coastal areas of the United States.

In direct response to public concern over the resulting degradation of beaches, Congress directed the Environmental Protection Agency to promulgate regulations which set standards for medical waste management. This 2-year demonstration program (Program) was in effect in five states from June, 1989 - June, 1991. Having examined the effects of the Program on beach washups of medical waste, government and private sector officials agreed that there was no single source for the medical waste that washed up on the beaches. The interaction of a variety of geophysical conditions (including persistent or unusual wind patterns, falling tides, and decreasing surf height), contributed to the washing up of medical waste. These geophysical factors, coupled with illegal disposal or careless management practices, may have caused the

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beach washups. Several studies and state analyses also agreed that disposal of syringes in municipal sewer systems was the major source of the medical waste found in the beach debris. Intravenous drug users and household medical waste generators typically generate only syringe-related waste. Because the program was not designed to affect these groups, and the extent of their contribution to beach washups is unknown, it is difficult to infer whether the Program was a primary factor in reducing beach washups.

The Program did, however, heighten public awareness of the importance of properly managing medical waste. State-initiated beach cleanup programs and medical waste washup reporting systems also have been instrumental in ensuring a quick cleanup response by authorities. It is important to note that the Center For Marine Conservation, an environmental organization that coordinates annual volunteer cleanups of beach debris, reported in 1990 that medical waste comprised less than 1 percent of the total amount of beach debris collected by its volunteers nationwide.

You also ask about enforcement of medical waste regulations. During the 2-year demonstration program, which ended in June, 1991, the EPA's enforcement strategy was designed to promote widespread compliance with the program. The strategy relied heavily on education and tried to maximize compliance through outreach and educational efforts. There was a clear preference for using inspections as a tool to promote proper medical waste management, rather than as a means of imposing penalties. During the two year program, it is estimated that 4,220 inspections were conducted and 178 formal enforcement actions were taken by the five States involved in the program.

I wish you success in your program and thank you for your interest in U.S. environmental policies. If you have additional questions or require further information, you may contact either

Jen-Tai Yang (202/260-6508) or Angela Lee (202/260-1616) of EPA's Taiwan program for assistance.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Shapiro, Director  
Office of Solid Waste

Enclosure