

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

MARCH 15, 1989

Dear Mr. Citizen

Thank you for your letter expressing your concern about the management of medical waste. We are also concerned and want to ensure that medical waste and all other wastes are properly handled too.

In the fall of 1988, Congress passed the Medical Waste Tracking Act in response to mismanagement incidents that occurred over the past summer. The Act authorized EPA to develop a regulation establishing a demonstration tracking program for medical wastes that would last two years in certain States. The regulation was signed by the EPA Administrator on March 13 and will be published in the Federal Register within the next two weeks. It will establish a tracking system that will insure generators that their waste arrives at its designated disposal facility. It will also set standards for segregation, packaging, labeling, and record keeping for the medical wastes covered by the regulation (regulated medical waste). The classes of regulated medical waste are listed in the regulation as well.

In order for disease to be transmitted, a chain of events must be completed. A virulent pathogen must be present in a sufficient quantity and gain access to a susceptible host in order for infection to occur. This chain is difficult to complete in an environmental setting. Human pathogens are fragile outside the human body and are most often transmitted from one person to another through direct exposure (e.g., if someone with a cold sneezes on you). Conditions in the environment are often not suitable for pathogens to survive and multiply or to gain access to a host.

Except for needle sticks, there are no reported incidents of infection due to environmental exposure to medical waste. In fact several studies indicate that medical waste is no more virulent than household waste. The risks of disease transmission are greatest to health care workers when they are providing care or analyzing specimens of body fluid (e.g., a nurse gives a shot and accidentally sticks herself with the used syringe). The already low risk can be decreased with proper packaging and handling. EPA published a guidance document which contains environmentally sound management practices for medical waste, the EPA Guide for Infectious Waste Management. I have enclosed a copy for your information. I have also enclosed a copy of the background document for our regulation which discusses in more detail some of the things I have related here.

EPA is also conducting studies on the types, quantities, generators, and management practices for medical waste which we will discuss in a report to Congress at the conclusion of the demonstration tracking program. I would also like to refer you to Pam Sulmer in the Minnesota Attorney General's

Office. She coordinated that State's report on medical waste and is working with the State legislature on medical waste issues. She can be reached at (612) 297-1222.

If I can be of further assistance to you, please feel free to call me at (202) 382-7458.

Sincerely,

Denise A. Zabinski, Chemist
Special Projects
Characterization Section