Finding the Rx for Managing Medical Wastes

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Foreword

The adequate management of medical wastes first became a major focus of public attention when medical wastes with other debris washed ashore on the East Coast in the summer of 1988. In October of that year, as part of OTA's assessment of municipal solid waste management, OTA issued a background paper entitled *Issues in Medical Waste Management.* That study provided an overview of medical waste disposal practices and potential risks associated with them, and discussed the need for further Federal involvement in managing medical wastes.

Also in October of 1988, Congress passed the Medical Waste Tracking Act, establishing a 2-year demonstration tracking program for medical waste management and directing the Environmental Protection Agency and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to complete several studies to evaluate management issues and potential risks related to medical waste disposal.

Some studies by these and other government agencies, and by private-sector interests, have been completed since that time on various aspects of medical waste management issues. The focus of concern has shifted primarily to the adequacy of handling, treatment, and disposal practices for medical wastes. Public concern remains high and much of the confusion and inconsistency associated with medical waste policy persists.

This OTA report was requested by the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, the House Subcommittee on Transportation and Hazardous Materials, Committee on Energy and Commerce, and the House Subcommittee on Regulation, Business Opportunities and Energy, Committee on Small Business. The report evaluates medical waste issues in the broader context of a waste management policy for the Nation. Waste reduction and recycling options for medical waste management, as well as incineration and non-incineration treatment alternatives are examined.

Applying a more comprehensive waste management approach to medical wastes, such as has evolved for municipal solid waste and hazardous waste, could help ensure environmentally sound and economically feasible waste practices. At a minimum, we realize that (as with most waste problems) there is no one management scenario to "solve" our medical waste problems; rather the most important task is to devise policies that will facilitate adoption of individually optimal solutions to specific problems.

OTA benefited from the assistance received from many organizations and individuals during the course of this study. We express our gratitude and thanks to the review panel and the many other reviewers for their input which greatly facilitated the preparation of the report. OTA, however, is solely responsible for the contents of this report.

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