



Position Statement

Medical Waste: Role of Nurses and Nursing

ICN Position:

The nursing profession world-wide recognises the vital role the natural environment plays in global health and acknowledges the real threat posed by medical waste.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes all nurses have a duty to reduce/eliminate the negative impact of medical waste on 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 medical waste.

ICN supports initiatives to reduce the harmful impact of medical 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 incineration to a maximum.
- Patient education on the impact of environmental pollution.

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

- Facilitate nurses' access to continuing education programmes on the subject of medical 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
- Advocate for safe waste disposal mechanisms
- Develop coalitions with other professions to lobby for safe waste disposal
- Define and regulate nursing competencies in environmental health

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Background

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 medical waste. The procurement, use and disposal of medical supplies affects the volume, labour intensity and cost of the resulting medical waste disposal.

Nurses in clinical care are producers of medical 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 medical waste.

References:

The Health Care Industry's Impact on the Environment: Strategies for Global Change, American Nurses Association and The University of Vermont, 1998.
Institute of Medicine Report: Nursing, Health and the Environment. National Academy Press, Washington DC, 1995.

Adopted in 1998

Reviewed and revised in 2004

Related ICN Positions:

- [Nurses and the Natural Environment](#)
- [Universal Right to Clean Water](#)

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.