

## Smart Disposal for Hypodermic Needles.

By Summer Best

Eighteen years ago, on a peaceful New Jersey shoreline, barefoot beachgoers stumbled across a creepy scene. There, coming in with the ocean tide, were floating gobs of used syringes and needles, body tissue samples, medical supplies and other hazardous waste.

Someone - a doctor or nurse? A diabetic or drug user? A medical facility? Had carelessly, and illegally, tossed their medical trash.

The incident sparked local swimming bans, and tourism was smashed for the season. Public outcry demanded accountability and change. Fear of needle sticks (accidental piercing by a needle), HIV, and pathogenic diseases were a few concerns. In response, Congress enacted the Medical Waste Tracking Act (MWTa) of 1988. President Reagan signed the bill November 1 of that year, effectively ensuring "that those who generate, handle, or dispose of medical waste are accountable, and it will encourage proper handling and disposal of such potentially dangerous waste."

MWTa expired June 21, 1999, but many states still maintain similar policies within their jurisdictions. Individual states are responsible for regulations covering disposal of medical wastes. Today, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, state and local waste management boards deal exclusively with the storage, transportation and disposal of wastes. Included in this are "sharps," or used needles, scalpels, razors and other cutting instruments.

### Everyday People

Although most hospitals and veterinary clinics dispose of sharps responsibly, many individuals outside of medical professions routinely toss sharps into the household garbage waste stream. The American Medical Association estimates that three billion needles and lancets are mixed with household trash annually. Guilty parties include animal owners, diabetic needle users, illegal drug users and home health providers.

According to the American Diabetes Association, approximately 1 million people suffer puncture wounds from hypodermic needles every year. Half of the injuries are caused by improper disposal in household garbage. "The common wisdom is that illicit drug users are causing the needle problem, but people who use needles at home are actually far more likely

to create risk for others," said David Goldberg, commercial recycling coordinator for the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corp.

Home users often put needles in soda cans or milk cartons, or they flush them down the toilet, Goldberg said, noting that this practice must be changed.

### Equine Sharps Disposal

What about individual horse owners? Routinely, horse owners administer intramuscular and intravenous injections, whether for vaccines, joint maintenance, pain management, or other therapy. Some are practiced within a veterinary-client relationship. Others are not.

Nathan Slovis, DVM, Chairman of Infectious Disease at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington, Kentucky, explained that sharps disposal is a critical issue for any veterinary hospital, or any horse owner giving injections.

"If you throw them in the trash, then anyone around the trash could be injured," Slovis said. "The trash man, children, anyone could be hurt by a needle or sharp object. It's more of an issue of injury. The chance of people harmed with infectious disease from equine needles is slim to none."

### Buy a Sharps Container

If you administer equine vaccines or injections, or if you have disposable blades or similar items in your barn or home, proper disposal should be a critical component of your management practices. And it's simple to implement with an official "sharps" container. Inexpensive, easy to store, and environmentally responsible, a sharps container's thick plastic barrier prevents needles from poking through.

Simply administer the medication to your horse (discard the plastic cap), and drop the syringe and needle into the sharps container.

When the sharps container is full, deliver it to your local veterinarian, human hospital or other medical facility for biomedical waste processing. Many facilities will accept containers for no charge; some charge a small fee.

If you prefer the convenience of mail, many companies now sell pre-paid sharps containers, offering customers the opportunity to simply mail a full container directly to a certified medical waste facility.

### Responsible Equine Facilities

At Hagyard Equine Medical Facility, bio-waste is collected at least once every week by Stericycle, one of the nation's largest incinerators of medical bio-hazard waste. Stericycle retrieves sharps containers, as well as containers containing other bio-hazardous materials.

"At our hospital, we put the entire syringe and needle into the sharps container," Slovis said.

Slovis explained that this practice virtually eliminates an outsider from finding a dirty syringe and being alarmed or trying to re-use it. With the high numbers used by a large veterinary clinic, they see no reason to take the chance of it being mistaken for a human syringe.

"Most horse owners could separate the needle from the syringe, place the syringe in the trash, and put the needle in a container," Slovis said. "If not a sharps container, then a strong jug of some sort, then tape up the top, and see if your veterinarian or local hospital can dispose of it properly for you."

### Economical & Easy

"It's my personal goal to motivate every horse owner to use a sharps container," said Sharon Baker, founder of EquiMedic USA, an equine first aid kit company based in Cyrus, Minnesota. "It amazes me how uneducated people are about sharps. When I ask people, particularly at trade shows, about what they do with their sharps, they say they just throw them in the wastebasket. Others put them in a coffee can. Others will wrap them in duct tape and then throw them in the wastebasket. It occurred to me that people just don't know any better."

EquiMedic USA markets and sells several sharps containers. They provide a 1-qt., environmentally responsible sharps container for \$3.25. Additional sizes are available for large operations at [www.equimed.com](http://www.equimed.com). A 1-qt. size could take many months - maybe years - for the average horse owner to fill. It's recommended that you not keep a sharps container for long periods of time. Excessive pathogen growth will take place if the container is not replaced periodically.

If you prefer a pre-paid container, EquiMedic USA provides a mail-back service, allowing users to ship the container back to EquiMedic USA for disposal.

"The equine industry needs to be responsible," Baker said. "I would like to see this industry take a fast-track, upscale learning level on this, and it's so easy to implement."

## Temporary Fix

A commercial sharps container is the preferred storage container for sharps at your home or farm. In a pinch, many states allow temporary storage in other containers, such as laundry detergent jugs, bleach jugs or other strong containers with tight lids. The suitable container should be:

- \* Puncture-resistant, leak proof, shatterproof and able to withstand abuse.
- \* The opening should be accessible and safe to use and it should be possible to safely and easily determine when the container is full.
- \* The container, when sealed, should be easy to handle without danger of spilling the contents.
- \* The container should bear the internationally recognized bio-hazard symbol.

Want to learn more? The Coalition for Safe Community Needle Disposal was established in Houston in 2002 to assume a nationwide role in promoting the safe disposal of used needles and syringes. Visit its Web site at [www.safeneedledisposal.org](http://www.safeneedledisposal.org).