

Saving Sharps, Saving Money: Recycling Medical Waste

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■ [4 Comments](#)

The following is an op-ed piece by Mike McInerney, vice president of Waste Management Healthcare Solutions. It does not describe the views or opinions of Earth911.



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[Find your local recycling solution for medical sharps](#)

How often have you visited the doctor, or had blood drawn, and noticed the nurse drop your syringe or lancet into a box labeled “biohazard?” Consider this: Americans generate 6,600 tons of waste each day and 10 to 15 percent of those used materials include



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biohazard waste like sharps and syringes.

Now, imagine there was a way to sterilize and renew the plastics and metal that make up those tons of used, dangerous sharp materials. That's just what Waste Management and BD did.

Used medical sharps are commonly incinerated or treated and discarded in landfills, but new technology has made it possible – and practical – to recycle those sharps. I became passionate about medical waste recycling when Waste Management (WM) partnered with one of the largest medical sharps manufacturers in the world, BD, to tackle the issue.

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Our solution was the BD ecoFinity Life Cycle Solution powered by Waste Management, a system for collecting and recycling used sharps to make new sharps. So far, BD ecoFinity recycles an estimated 70 percent of medical sharps in the waste stream. The process begins when WM collects the sharps collection box full of used sharps.

To prevent injury from disposed sharps, WM does not open the filled containers upon collection. The entire container and contents are sterilized at high temperatures and then shredded. Next, the materials are separated. Metal materials are recovered for recycling and plastic materials are “pelletized” so that they can be used in injection molding for manufacturing more BD Recykleen sharps containers. These sanitary BD Recykleen containers are used in hospitals to collect more used sharps waste and continue the cycle.

Sharps waste is only one piece of the medical waste stream, but recycling programs like BD ecoFinity can have a large impact. As an example, a test of the program at the Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, Calif., demonstrated that the BD ecoFinity system could divert an estimated 38,000 pounds of sharps waste from landfills annually.

More than 16 billion injections are administered globally each year. Imagine the impact if more hospitals around the world implemented sharps recycling programs. Recycling sharps also does more than save virgin materials and landfill space—it cuts costs for hospitals. American hospitals spend \$10 billion annually on waste disposal. This number can be reduced by recycling medical waste, allowing funds to be diverted to other hospital and patient care initiatives.

Recycling medical waste improves sustainability and safety, while also saving hospital resources. It's a win-win-win solution. Are there any other materials you've been surprised to find are recyclable? Will you ask your local hospital if they recycle sharps?"



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