

## Health Care Waste Management: Sharing the Responsibility

Foreign aid has channeled billions of dollars for the provision of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies to prevent the spread of infection and to treat and care for millions of people affected by HIV/AIDS. Through voluntary counseling and testing, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and provision of antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) for treatment and prevention of medical transmission, programs have provided essential commodities including HIV/AIDS test supplies, ARVs, and clinical laboratory supplies. Large investments are also being made in malaria, tuberculosis, and new vaccine introduction programs.

Supply chain management and appropriate use of these health commodities are being strengthened through several programs; however, to date, health care waste management (HCWM) has only been actively acknowledged through injection safety programs. HCWM has yet to be systematically recognized and supported as an integral requirement for all health service delivery programs, particularly those resulting in infectious waste.

Proper HCWM is critical because:

- Improper disposal of infectious waste increases the risk of transmitting HIV/AIDS and other bloodborne diseases, particularly through sharps reuse and accidental needlestick injury.
- In addition to therapeutic drugs and supplies, the increase in test kits, phlebotomy equipment, syringes, and other nonbiodegradable supplies has subsequently increased the burden on already strained HCWM systems.
- Plans to increase foreign aid budgets will magnify the amount of infectious and other waste generated and will result in an even greater burden on health systems and the environment.
- Safe and proper disposal of infectious waste protects not just health workers, patients, and the community, but also air and water quality.

Safe disposal of infectious waste must be integrated into program plans and budgets. Key HCWM elements for programs to include are:

- Planning with health services for safe disposal of infectious waste generated.
- Training of health workers and waste handlers on proper management of infectious waste.
- Introduction and/or reinforcement of simple guidelines on segregation, handling, treatment, and disposal.
- Ensuring basic supplies such as safety boxes, personal protective equipment, and color-coded bins for segregation are available.
- Ensuring appropriate final treatment and disposal solutions are available.

It is imperative that HCWM becomes an integral element of all programs producing infectious waste and that resources are set aside in order to ensure that disposal of the essential commodities to test, treat and prevent the spread of disease does not harm health workers, the community, or the environment.