

Coordinating Medical Waste Management

Miskolc, Borsod-Abauj-Zemplen County, Hungary

Background

In Hungary, environmental pollution control is a responsibility of the local governments, although the national government sets the laws and standards monitored by the Ministry of Environment and Regional Planning. Landfills in the City of Miskolc (population 191,000) were being polluted by medical waste generated by two municipally owned hospitals, ten county hospitals, and other medical facilities. An in-depth survey was conducted in April 1994 to collect data from the medical facilities on the amounts of solid and liquid medical wastes generated, waste management, and training in health and safety issues and measures. Also, data were collected on handling practices including separation, identification, collection, measurement, transportation, treatment, and disposal of medical waste. Results showed a lack of effective management practices such as the use of poorly functioning incinerators without required emissions controls.

Innovation

At the initiative of city officials a medical waste coordinating committee was formed to effectively and cooperatively address the medical waste pollution problem. The coordinating committee included representatives from all hospitals and medical facilities surveyed, the county Public Health Institute, the Regional Environmental Inspectorate, and local city and county government officials. Between March and May 1995, three workshops were held. At the first workshop the coordinating committee discussed the survey results and the assistance needed by hospitals to initiate action plans for effective medical waste management. At the second workshop, national government officials presented the survey results, reviewed recommended actions, discussed alternative treatment technologies, and addressed potential solutions. A third workshop was held to assess the hospitals' progress in drafting a medical waste management policy and to set action plan deadlines.

During 1995, city and county government officials worked closely with the hospitals and the medical facilities to implement action plans. In May 1996, a meeting was held for directors of Regional Environmental Inspectorates, to discuss medical waste management from the perspectives of both the recommended implementation plans and environmental feasibility. Appropriate recommendations were drafted regarding the Ministry of Environment and Regional Planning hazardous waste regulations. A final training workshop was held for hospital directors and administrators. As part of the workshop, a video on medical waste practices that was made at one of the participating hospitals was evaluated.

Results

Hospitals have improved their medical waste management practices. The coordinating committee proved valuable as a vehicle for developing and implementing cost-effective solutions to medical waste management and pollution problems and in making policy recommendations to the national government. Regulations addressing hazardous waste, recently issued by the Ministry of Environment and Regional Planning, now better reflect what is actually achievable by the hospitals and enforceable by local officials. Based on this experience city and county officials elected to cooperate in establishing a regional treatment facility based on a mutual agreement between the Mayor of Miskolc and the president of the Borsod county council. The project, with its emphasis on cooperation, improved health and safety measures, cost-effectiveness, and environmental protection at the local level, is a successful model that could be replicated in other communities.

Summary

Local government officials in cooperation with hospital representatives and regional health and environmental departments initiated programs to improve public and environmental health protection. Moreover, through a collaborative effort, local governments made policy recommendations to the national governments regarding health and safety measures and environmental protection regulations.

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