

Waste Management as an Educational Imperative

By Alfred L. Frost III, M.S., D.D.S.

There's a strong need today for dental offices to be educated about current regulations such as federal and state EPA-mandated amalgam separator use, as well as the need to recycle scrap amalgam, X-ray chemistry, lead, bio-hazardous materials, chemicals, and the new push for pharmaceutical and universal waste recycling. It's imperative that dentists be aware of, stay current with, and be proactive in the implementation of all necessary policies and procedures required under the various regulations in order to maintain their practices in a constant state of compliance and avoid the risk of costly fines.

We are, however, a society that has become accustomed to simply throwing away that which is used, empty or no longer of use to us. Behaviors can be difficult to change. This is no different with the dental community than it is with the general public. If we've done something the same way for years (for example, throwing scrap amalgam in the trash or "red bag"), we are often slow to change our behavior. We "perceive" that the way we're doing things is just fine, thank you. In these situations people are often refractory to change.

We need to have an educational model for waste management, much as has been done with infection control training. The regulations are here. What's needed now is to disseminate all relevant information so that the dental community can comply in the most time- and cost-efficient manner possible. To do this, the learning curve must be significantly shortened.

Given the busy nature of a dental practice — and I can personally attest to this — the individual dentist will frequently delegate the responsibility for environmental compliance to a staff member. Unfortunately, this person may possess little, if any, background or knowledge base in this area.

In the climate of environmental regulation in which we practice it's imperative for dentists to fully understand the importance of viewing waste management in its entirety. Many dentists I've spoken with believe that turning to their equipment dealer as the "key authority" for a solution to their waste management needs is an appropriate response. They're conditioned to believe the is-

sue is one of "equipment" rather than one of "waste management." There is often a serious lack of understanding of what full compliance entails — that is, equipment, recycling, tracking, paper trails, reporting, etc. I've been in offices that have separators in place, but they still throw scrap amalgam in the trash. Some offices don't realize that the model separator they were sold actually requires frequent maintenance or filter changes, or that the facility their wastes are sent to must be certified TSDFs (treatment, storage and disposal facilities).

The dentist who wishes to do the right thing often spends money and, in return, only gets a partial solution and a false sense of security, believing that he or she is in compliance with all regulations. The gamut of regulations and nuances contained therein are generally beyond the scope of knowledge of an equipment vendor, whose purpose is to sell equipment and fill the dentist's order for supplies.

Study the issue for yourself. Don't rely on reflex behaviors. Once you begin to treat waste management as a total concept, rather than as an ad hoc assemblage of partial solutions, you can easily bring your practice into full compliance at significantly reduced direct and indirect costs. Not doing your due diligence and relying on partial solutions will generally cost you more, not only in dollars, but also in time and aggravation. ♦



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For more information regarding waste management solutions available for MDA members, contact MDA-endorsed DRNA at 800-360-1001, ext. 15, or visit www.drna.com.