

Podcast. Disposal of sharps

Welcome everyone to today's podcast of the Difaem Health Community. We are in the middle of a miniseries on how to handle sharps in our overall IPC podcast series. My name is XXX and I am here today with my colleague XXX who has a lot of practical experience with handling sharps and knows many important aspects in connection with this issue, as I have learned in our last podcast.

Hi everyone, good to be here again and good that you are tuning in again, because today we will talk about a crucial topic: the safe disposal of sharps. Those among you who missed the last podcast dealing with the safe use of sharps can find it on our website www.difaem-community.de.

Yes, of course, you can do that but anyway I would like to make a short summary of what you missed last time because we are continuously moving forward from there.

Sharps pose a significant risk for the health of patients and health care workers alike because they can puncture or damage the skin barrier and therefore bring infectious material directly into the body. Therefore, safe and responsible handling is extremely important. Single use sharps should strictly only be used once. Whoever works with sharps should be prepared for the task ahead, check the equipment, be focused and never in a hurry. If help is needed, it should be requested at any time.

When handling the sharp to perform a task like drawing blood or stitching a wound, it should be done in a straightforward way. Sharps should have defined locations to be placed when used intermittently and it is the responsibility of the user to warn other people of the danger at hand and to see to the proper disposal of the sharps used.

Now I hand over to you again to talk about the proper disposal of sharps.

Well, talking about the proper disposal of sharps, there are quite some points to take care of. Most important, the disposal does not only start once you have finished your task. Last time I talked about preparing the things you need; and there it already starts! Of course, safety needles or safety lancets are nice, but they are more expensive and not always readily available everywhere. If money and availability are no issues, only use safety devices. If you have a limited supply use them especially in higher risk procedures like for example drawing blood from a squirming and crying child or when drawing blood in an HIV clinic. If they are not available, you will also be fine if you adhere to the rules and regulations on the responsible handling of sharps. In any case, you must be careful.

A word about recapping. If you do not have safety devices that are meant for recapping, do never ever recap used sharps. Some health care workers still think it is safe to recap a needle or syringe and then carry it around. I can tell you – it is not. Most needle prick injuries occur when recapping. So please never recap a normal needle or syringe after use. If you recap a normal needle, the needle tip will pass very close to your fingers. It's only millimetres, so don't endanger yourself – don't recap. Never!

Okay, safety first. Safety as in safety devices, if they are available. But also safety as in not recapping, if you are dealing with the traditional devices.

Yes, that is absolutely correct. As I said, I have to start thinking about the disposal of sharps right from the beginning of my task at hand. Disposal boxes should be strategically placed around the work places. However, I have to consider the distance when I execute a bedside procedure for example. In many cases it might be safer to carry the disposal box with me, so that I don't have to carry a contaminated sharp through the whole ward but can dispose of it right after use. If the sharps containers are fastened to their locations, it is worth considering whether to bring the patient close to the place of disposal, so that the distance between use and disposal are kept short.

Okay I got it: keep the distance short between used sharp and container. Either by carrying the container with you or by performing the procedure close to the container. Tell us, what is so special about those safety boxes?

Safety boxes, also known as sharps containers, are indispensable tools for the safe disposal of sharps in a medical context. These containers are made of puncture-resistant materials, ensuring that used needles, syringes, lancets, and other sharp medical instruments can be discarded without the risk of accidental needlestick injuries.

They might come as plastic containers, made of metal or –the most common option today – from cardboard. The sharps containers can be coloured yellow or just be cardboard but they should always carry a biohazard sign. These boxes come with a sharps aperture where needles, syringes up to 20mls, lancets, blades and other sharps can be dropped in. Once these things are inside the box, they should not and cannot be taken out again. When the box is full – there is a maximum filling line – the sharps aperture can be securely sealed and all the dangerous waste is stored safely until it can be burned.

The important points here are: puncture proof material, yes, small aperture, so that nobody will stick the fingers or hands in, maximum filling line – do never every fill the container until the very top. I've seen safety containers, where needles were sticking out at the top, because the containers were too full. This poses a serious risk for the person who has to close the lid and even for people who only pass by or come too close. And, the last important point is that the box must have a safe and secure seal that cannot be opened again without effort.

If you have no access whatsoever to certified safety containers you can use plastic cans or small jerry cans. Make sure you draw a maximum line, that is about 7cm below the opening and only use cans that have a screw-on lid to securely seal them. Plastic bottles are too thin,

needles inside can perforate the plastic of a bottle, and so do not use plastic bottles to discard sharps.

A homemade safety box from a jerry can is still the best possibility, if you do not have proper safety boxes. Never ever, discard sharps in the normal waste or toilets. They will pose an enormous risk to the people who handle the trash or clean septic tanks. Don't forget, if you just dump the trash, the sharps will remain in the environment and continue being a danger for everybody around.

Now I really understand the importance of these special boxes. As you already mentioned in our last podcast on the safe handling of sharps, the way from the task carried out to the disposal box is the responsibility of the person who used the sharp.

Yes, that is absolutely right. As the one who used a sharp, I am fully responsible, that it is discarded properly. My sharp, my responsibility. Only after having dropped it in the sharp container ends my responsibility.

After having dropped the sharp in the box intended for this purpose, there are still some steps to take before the sharp is finally disposed of properly, right?

Yes. As I said, most of the containers are made of cardboard, because this makes it easy to incinerate them. Once they are full and sealed, they should be safely stored in a dry place away from the public. At regular intervals, all containers should be incinerated. How this works, we will learn when we delve a bit deeper into our next podcast about waste management. Big hospitals in larger cities or university hospitals might have a contractor who handles the final steps in the disposal of the sharps. Even then, it is important, to have every container correctly sealed and not tampered with, as even more people will be handling the containers.

Always keep in mind that the safe disposal of sharps is essential for the well-being of healthcare workers, patients, and the public. By following the rules of safe sharps management and disposal and maintaining a culture of safety, healthcare facilities can minimize the risks for everyone and break the chain of infection at various points.

Okay, thank you. Let me wrap this up again. For the safe disposal of sharps, it is my responsibility to ensure short distances between the place use and the disposal site; I never ever recap my sharp but put it in a designated container. Once this container is filled to the maximum line, I seal the lid and inform the person responsible for the further steps to be taken. Then the containers are stored in a dry place away from the public and ultimately burned.

This is how it should be done for our own safety and for the safety of others. What happens if an accident occurs and someone gets a needleprick injury? Even if we are very careful, this may happen, right?

Yes, unfortunately, it sometimes happens, but I think we have already talked of quite a lot of issues today. Therefore, I will save the answer to that question for another podcast.

For today thank you all for listening. Let's work together to break the chain of infection and until we hear each other again: stay safe and stay blessed.

https://extranet.who.int/pgweb/sites/default/files/documents/PQS_E010_SB01.1.pdf