

Pharmacy Practice



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The influenza vaccination season is approaching and the number of people using injectable medications in the community is growing. It may be a good time for your pharmacy to review how sharps are managed; including handling, placement of sharps containers and disposal.

Recommendations for handling of sharps

Staff should receive training and education in correct segregation and disposal procedures for sharps, as well as medications.

Any staff member who has used or finds a disposable sharp instrument or device must be individually responsible for its safe management and immediate disposal after use. This task cannot be delegated.

- After they are used, single-use syringes and needles and other sharp items should be placed in an appropriate container that has rigid walls, is resistant to puncture and is sealed or can be securely closed. These containers should be clearly labelled, puncture and leak proof, and conform to Australian Standards.
- The containers should be located at the point of use or, if this is not possible, as close as practical to the use area.
- Clear signage should be placed above the containers, indicating items that may be placed in the containers and items that may not be placed in the containers.
- Sharps containers must be appropriately placed, off the floor, so that they are out of reach of children. They should also be placed in a secure position or mounted on the wall to prevent tipping.

- Sharps containers must not be filled above the mark that indicates the bin is three-quarters full.
- Do not empty sharps from one sharps container to another.
- Never re-sheath a needle
- Sharps containers are not designed for disposal of medicines – Use a RUM bin for expired or returned medications (see article on following page).

Disposal of full sharps containers

Members of the public can be warned that there is a penalty for the unsafe disposal of sharps, including in household or general rubbish collection, and could lead to a fine if they do this. Your customers can dispose of their sharps in the public bins in various locations or in most cases at the offices of their local council.

The disposal of full sharps containers by pharmacies can be a cost burden. Encouraging your customers to dispose of their sharps themselves may reduce your workplace risks and costs, as well as simplify your management and storage of used sharps.

Public Community Sharps Disposal Bins in Tasmania

There are seven public sharps disposal bins in Tasmania. Anyone can dispose of sharps in these community sharps bins including pharmacies.

Only smaller sharps containers will fit into the chute of these disposal bins, usually up to 3 litres unless indicated. Locations are:

1. Sheffield - outside the council chambers
2. Devonport - outside the council chambers
3. Ulverstone - Community Health Centre, just inside the gate (will only take fitpack size)
4. Invermay – Invermay Post Office in rear car park (will only take fitpack size)
5. Clarence – Clarence Integrated Care Centre, outside the NSP outlet on the car park side
6. Hobart - beside the rivulet, bottom end of Collins Street
7. Watchorn street – Anglicare (will only take fitpack size)

Needle and Syringe Program (NSP)

The NSP can arrange disposal of returned needles/fitpacks in an approved sharps container, supplied as part of the NSP program. This can include disposal of larger 22 litre sharps containers. This does not include returns from diabetic patients or other medical waste.

Contact: Francine Smith at DHHS for information about disposal of NSP Sharps Waste on 6166 0675

Diabetes Tasmania and NDSS

Diabetes Tasmania will accept returned needles used by diabetes patients, in an approved sharps container. NDSS Sub-Agents can take diabetes related sharps containers to the Diabetes Tasmania Offices in Hobart or Launceston. This does not include returns from NSP clients or other medical waste.

Contact: Roberta Gates at Diabetes Tasmania for information about disposal of NDSS Sharps Waste on 1300 136 588

Veolia

Veolia can arrange pickup and disposal of sharps waste, as well as other medical waste. There is a cost for this service.

Contact Veolia (Tasmanian Office) on 6244 0000.

Local Councils

Most councils do not accept Sharps Waste from businesses. However, many do accept Sharps Containers for disposal from the public.

Contact your local council to see if there is an arrangement for pharmacies or public. Some councils offer exchange services to the public for sharps containers.

Contact: A list of council contacts and their returns policy is available on the Guild website at www.guild.org.au/tas



Appropriate use of your Return of Unwanted Medicines (RUM) bins

By Toni Riley B Pharm, Project Manager, National Return and Disposal of Unwanted Medicines P/L

Recently, I have conducted a small scale audit of some filled RUM bins awaiting incineration and thought it was an appropriate time to remind all community pharmacists of their responsibility to ensure the appropriate use of the RUM collection bins and handling of all returned and unwanted medicines. I was really alarmed to find that a large percentage of these RUM bins contained Schedule 8 drugs that were not rendered unusable, and were easily identifiable.

It is important that pharmacists refer to their own State and Territory Drugs and Poisons Regulations to familiarise themselves with the correct procedures to be followed when receiving Schedule 8 drugs for destruction. Although there are differences between each State and Territory's requirement for the return and destruction of Schedule 8 drugs, in general these medicines should be rendered unusable prior to placing them in the RUM bin.

This audit found that in many cases these medicines were still in the original pack, while some others were loose strips but nonetheless easily identifiable. There was very little evidence in the audited bins that any attempt had been made to render these medicines unusable. This poses a significant risk.

A concern has also been expressed by the incineration contractor regarding the significant number of aerosols found in the RUM bins. It is not necessary to dispose of a used inhaler in the RUM bin – such items are safely disposed of using the usual local council garbage collection – the canisters are usually made of aluminium and can be recycled along with the plastic actuator. Only those still containing any medicine should be placed in the RUM bin.

I was glad to see that most of the RUM bins were almost 100% full, and only a very small number contained inappropriate items, such as broken dispensing measures, plastic sleeves for dose administration aids, patient's prescriptions, plastic pockets, infant formula, sharps and durable insulin delivery devices (re-usable insulin pens).

In Australia, the community is fortunate to have such a program for the return and disposal of unwanted medicines, which is fully funded by the Commonwealth Government. Like all funded projects, we must always ensure the best value for expenditure of public monies, so it is vital that all community pharmacists ensure that the RUM bins are only used for the disposal of medicines and avoid placing any non-medicines in the RUM bin.

As I am sure all community pharmacists are aware, the RUM bins are ordered through their usual wholesaler and returned when full by the same route. They are available throughout Australia, regardless of location.

Although it is important that community pharmacies have a RUM bin available for their customers' unwanted medicines, a large surplus of bins is unnecessary. RUM bins are a valuable resource which needs to be managed carefully so that they can be accessed by all consumers.

