

Commissioner's Column
New Radioactive Material Disposal Issue

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During the past year, a newly emerging problem related to radioactive medical waste has come to our attention. The disposal of home medical waste generated by patients who have had radioactive I-131 treatment has been triggering radioactive detection alarms at garbage waste transfer stations. This year, there have been 10 incidents of this type. Each time the radiation alarm is triggered at a garbage waste transfer station, the municipality is required to shut down the transfer station, identify the source of the radiation and pay for the cleanup of the material and facility. This costs the local municipality or County, between \$3,800 and \$5,000 per event.

Because the quantities of radiation emitted from home medical waste are minute and not considered a threat to the health of the public, there are no existing state regulations regarding its disposal. It has been considered appropriate to dispose of such materials in household waste, after being retained in the home for a matter of days until the radiation levels are considered negligible. Newer technologies at garbage transfer stations have resulted in ultra-sensitive radiation detectors capable of picking up even minute quantities of radiation.

We are asking the assistance of the medical community in solving this problem. You can assist us in educating those patients who are treated with such radiation on how to properly dispose of their household waste that may contain trace amounts of radiation.

The Westchester County Department of Health and the Westchester County Department of Environmental Facilities have already enlisted the help of physicians who use radioactive I-131 for patient treatment. All physicians who use this treatment have agreed to allow their patients to return any contaminated waste to their facilities for proper disposal. We are most appreciative of the exemplary cooperation that these physicians are extending to help us to solve the problem.

The Westchester County Department of Health and the Westchester County Department of Environmental Facilities will be launching a comprehensive education campaign to physicians and veterinarians in Westchester County who hold radioactive material licenses. In the near future, these physicians and veterinarians will receive *Personal Medical Disposal Kits* for distribution to their patients who receive radioactive therapy. These kits will contain educational fact sheets on proper disposal methods for patients' contaminated waste products and a sturdy, large disposal bag for the collection of household medical waste products that may be contaminated. The trash bag will have a place for physicians to fill in the "safe date" after which the contaminated waste may be disposed of in their regular household trash, should they choose not to return it to the facilities where they received treatment.

We thank you in advance for your continued support of the Health Department's efforts to keep our environment safe and healthy. Your commitment to the health of Westchester County residents and the environment is most commendable.

For more information about our newest campaign to reduce the introduction of radioactive contamination into our environment, please visit the Physician's Corner of the Health Department's website at www.westchestergov.com/health.