

WASTE MANAGEMENT

Nearly all hospital solid wastes in Mexico end up in municipal landfill sites. According to an official report, only 15 of the 300 hospitals in Mexico City apply any degree of waste management. The hazards associated with improper waste disposal have been recognized by the relevant government authorities, but the development of proper waste management systems will require the imposition of standards combined with the development of an appropriate infrastructure.

A first attempt to deal with this problem came in an official standard, or *norma oficial* published on October 22, 1993. This *norma* classified dangerous residues, and stipulated that they must be handled according to the General Law of Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection. In spite of this, there are still no official standards to guide the specific disposal procedures for bio-medical wastes. Some industry observers anticipate a non-official standard to be published in late 1994 or early 1995.

A recent study by the *Movimiento Ecológico de México*, the Mexican Ecological Movement, estimates that hospitals generate an average 10 kilograms of waste per bed every day. Changing the current practices will not be easy. The government will face two major obstacles:

- people will protest if waste-treatment facilities, such as incinerators, are installed in their communities; and
- enforcement of any new standards will require additional resources.

A few Mexican companies are capable of supplying new and technologically-advanced incinerators, but costs are an obstacle, particularly since regulations are lacking. Air pollution standards may also interfere with the ability of hospitals to use incineration equipment.

One solution is the cooperation of groups of hospitals to use a common incinerator. Moreover, the *Departamento del Distrito Federal (DDF)*, Department of the Federal District, now requires that a waste-management plan be included in all new hospital projects, and the issue has attracted increasing attention. Sterilizers and grinders also offer a partial solution.

Special containers for needles and other sharp instruments have been installed in many hospitals, particularly within the *Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS)*, Mexican Institute for Social Security, facilities but these continue to be disposed of in municipal waste systems with no further treatment. Some hospitals are reluctant to use these containers because there have been examples of *pepenadores*, garbage pickers, hauling them away.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the management of medical waste will gradually become an important priority. Firms with experience in this area will benefit from the development of progressive policies. The most successful products and services will be those that meet the price, quality, installation and after-sales service requirements of Mexican customers. Training packages should be designed to offset the lack of experience that Mexico has in this area.

