

# Options and alternatives

## The future of the QEII incinerator

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Six years after the construction of the biomedical waste incinerator at the QEII Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, concerned citizens are campaigning for the incinerator to comply with environmental health regulations. After a recent tour by a group of local residents, many more concerns were raised, making the future of the incinerator uncertain.

When the incinerator was completed in 1991, it was designed in accordance with the standards and regulations of the time. These standards have since changed, leaving local residents in a cloud of dark smoke.

The main concern of all parties involved, including the provincial Department of the Environment, is the emission of furans and dioxins which result from the burning of the PCBs (PolyChlorinated Biphenyls) found in plastic waste. Both furans and dioxins are considered to be cancer-causing agents, although it is not known at what levels they may be considered hazardous to the public. In 1991, no regulations were in place to control the emission of furans or dioxins. The incinerator is presently operating on a permit from the Department of the Environment.

The Department of Transportation and Public Works has been

given the deadline of May 1st of this year to find a solution to the incinerator problem. A committee is presently looking at many proposals. The most likely of these options is a "retro-fit" for the incinerator that will catch more of the furans and dioxins which reform at higher levels during the cooling down period of the burn.

The actual implementation of the retro-fit, however, would take another six to seven months. During this time the incinerator is hoping to have its permit extended. The Department of the Environment has strictly stated that there must be an alternative plan for the waste if the furans and dioxins are not controlled at a 0.5 level by the May 1st deadline. The incinerator is presently releasing the chemicals at a 5 level. This backup plan would involve the shipment of all biohazardous waste from the QEII to another facility in Quebec at the price of 1.2-1.3 million dollars.

The Department of the Environment commented that the incinerator is within national guidelines, except for the furan/dioxin levels.

Dr. E.W. Angelopoulos, an associate professor at Dalhousie University who was present at the recent tour of the facility, believes there are a few alternatives to help clean the air around the incinerator. The structure was built to destroy contagious or otherwise

hazardous biomedical wastes. A burn temperature of 300 degrees should be more than sufficient to destroy any microorganisms present in these wastes. However, since the waste is primarily plastic, another object of the burn is volume reduction. A temperature of 1000 degrees or greater is required for a "clean burn", in which the plastic will be burned and its burn byproducts rendered inactive. The incinerator is currently burning at insufficient temperatures in the 800 degree range. Burns at these temperatures often overheat the facility, resulting in the use of the unfiltered emergency stacks.

Dr. Angelopoulos strongly questions the need for the incineration of the plastic. One possible alternative is some type of separation of the plastic waste to reduce the amount of plastic entering the presently unpoliced system. A better solution, though more expensive and time consuming, is a return to the use of glass in the hospital setting with autoclaving to kill contagious microorganisms. This old system was both friendlier to the environment and created jobs.

The question now remains as to whether the Department of the Environment will give in and extend the incinerator's permit, or whether they will stick to their decision and force the QEII to ship its costly waste to Quebec.

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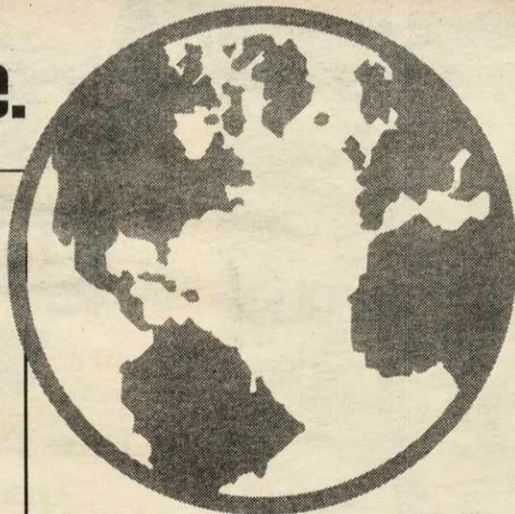
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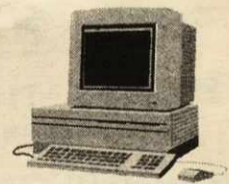
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