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Guidelines on Standard Operating Procedures for Microbiology

Disposal options

There are three main disposal options:

- > render the waste noninfectious by autoclaving and dispose it in the general waste stream, if autoclaving is not possible, decontaminate with chemical disinfectants or by boiling for 20 minutes before disposal.
- > on-site incineration, if possible
- > transportation of locally-generated waste to a distant appropriate facility.

Incineration is the preferred disposal option. Not only does this method render the waste noninfectious, but it also changes the form and shape of the waste. Sterilization is an effective method for decontaminating waste, but it does not alter the appearance of the waste. Steam sterilization in an autoclave at a temperature of 121°C for at least 15 minutes destroys all forms of microbial life, including high numbers of bacterial spores. This type of complete sterilization can also be accomplished using dry heat which requires a temperature of 160-170°C for 2-4 hours. However, it must be ensured that heat comes in contact with the material to be rendered sterile. Therefore, bottles containing liquid material should have loosened caps or cotton plug caps to allow for steam and heat exchange within the bottle. Biohazard bags containing waste should be tied loosely. Once sterilized, biohazardous waste should be sealed in appropriate containers, labelled as disinfected waste and disposed of in an approved facility.

Biological waste should be clearly labelled prior to disposal and complete records should be maintained.

Burial

It is not a decontaminating process per se. However, it does prevent the infectious material from becoming a reservoir of infection if properly buried. It requires digging a pit of almost 5 metres depth and 2 metres width and having a tightly fitted heavy lid on top. Disposable containers with clinical material are thrown daily into it and the lid is replaced immediately after throwing the specimens. Once a week, the refuse is covered with a layer of quicklime. If quicklime is not available, the refuse is covered with almost 10 cm thick layer of dried leaves once a week.

Further reading

Et Neoph 1994 et al. Basics of Quality Assurance for Intermediate and Peripheral Laboratories. WHO Regional Publication, Eastern Mediterranean Series No. 2, 156-166, 1995.

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