

Medical Waste Is Not Recyclable

by [MIKE TOWNSHEND](#) on Sep 1, 2012 • 9:00 am



Recently hazardous medical waste was found in the recycling containers at the New Paltz Recycling Center. (photo by Lauren Thomas)

While an investigation of medical waste improperly dumped at the New Paltz Recycling Center in mid-July continues, town recycling coordinator Laura Petit hopes the incident will spark greater awareness of hazardous waste in general.

“I’m still just taken aback that they thought this was recyclable plastic. It’s bizarre. Syringes, needles anything that came in contact with any sort of bodily fluids is not recyclable — and it shouldn’t even go into the garbage,” Petit said. “There’s almost no excuse to dump it in a recycling container.”

Sorting through the co-mingled recyclables last month, a recycling center worker stumbled into a handful of syringes used to flush out IV tubing and some used catheter tubing. The discovery came as a shock. The town dump recognized the potential seriousness of the incident. “One of the syringes looked like it had possibly dried blood in there,” said Petit. “I mean, we really weren’t sure at this point.”

Recycling workers sought help from the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency and from medical waste hauler Stercycle. Crews had to search the rest of the 30-cubic-yard container to make sure nothing else had been chucked illegally.

Because of the federal Medical Waste Tracking Act, all of those syringes found in New Paltz had tracking numbers embedded in them by the manufacturer. A list of that information was turned over to the New Paltz police.

New York State requires that all nursing homes and hospitals act as disposal sites where used needles can be taken. Often the so-called “sharps” — lancets, syringes and needles — produced at home stem from treating serious or chronic conditions like diabetes, cancer, allergies or arthritis. Benedictine Hospital and nearby nursing homes take that waste.

Had the New Paltz syringes been dumped accidentally or maliciously? Petit said that at this point she didn’t know. But in an era where knowledge of blood-borne pathogens is ever-present, the move was puzzling. “I really can’t believe that someone would think it would be recyclable,” said Petit. “I think everybody would just kind of know. We’re raised, Don’t touch a needle, Don’t touch this, Don’t do that.”

The New Paltz Recycling Center is not allowed to take liquids, hazardous waste, or biohazards. With those guidelines in mind, people who’re still unsure if their items can be accepted at the dump should call and ask first. The number is 255-8456.

The New York State health department can help find other safe-disposal sites. Call 1-800-522-5006.