



Housekeeping

by Jesse Denton

What to do with needles, syringes, and other “sharps”

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For the most part, exposure to sharps is not a big problem in the lodging industry; it can however present a serious problem exposing many “back of the house” employees or future guests to injury by carelessly discarded syringes and other contaminated items. One definition of “sharps” is anything that can cause a puncture wound and expose employees or guests to blood or other body fluids that may contain germs (pathogens). Most commonly encountered sharps are hypodermic needles. But sharps may also include other items that have been contaminated with blood (i.e., broken glass, razor blades, etc.).

Who to train

Everyone should know how to respond should they encounter sharps in the workplace. For most staff members, this will typically require calling a trained responder. The safety factor of having only a few trained responders rather than trying to train everyone is huge because it is easier to manage and monitor. Housekeeping management staff will frequently be trained as responders, as will engineering and security staffs. Depending upon the size of your hotel or resort it may be appropriate to train others (i.e. lifeguards, laundry). What must be made clear and rigidly enforced (for employee safety and because of OSHA regulations) is that everyone who has not been properly trained and designated as a sharps responder must not handle sharps.

Where sharps will be found

Everyone should know where they are most likely to encounter sharps. Trash cans and beds are two of the most frequent repositories of uncapped syringes. Train housekeeping employees to never reach into trash cans, this includes in public areas as well as guestrooms. If trash needs to be pushed down further into the receptacle, use a trash masher or another solid object such as the bottom of a smaller trash can.

Room attendants should also be trained to look underneath beds for sharps and to remove used bed linens by grasping the outside corners, never reaching under the mattress for the edge of blankets or sheets. Bed linens should not be tucked under a mattress without first inspecting under the mattress for needles or other foreign items. Housemen who routinely strip bedding from “vacant dirty” rooms should wear puncture resistant gloves.

This advice also holds true for laundry workers removing linen from the chute discharge or from carts of linen delivered from guest floors. Because hotel laundry workers have been previously injured by syringes in bed linens, it is recommended these employees wear a heavy apron to protect against punctures and pathogenic materials that may be on bedding and bathroom linens.

Guestroom and lobby attendants should also be trained to check between and beneath chair and sofa cushions for possible sharps. Check by slowly lifting seat cushions. Never use your fingers to feel between cushions for foreign objects. Sharps may also be found in public restrooms, especially in trash cans. To prevent guests from placing sharps in trash containers in restrooms consider installing wall-mounted tamperproof disposal boxes.



Sharps collection

Sharps should be picked up and handled by mechanical means such as brush and dust pan, tongs, or forceps. Because of the possibility of pathogenic contamination, never use bare hands when handling sharps.

Contaminated needles and other sharp items should not be bent, recapped, or removed unless no other alternative exists, and then it should be accomplished by a mechanical device or a one-handed technique (the syringe cover is laid on a flat surface and the needle inserted to the point it is covered using one hand to prevent puncturing the other hand.) Shearing or breaking of contaminated needles is prohibited. To properly dispose of regulated waste, such as contaminated sharps and laundry items, deposit them in appropriately labeled, sealed, puncture-proof containers. The sharps disposal container must be puncture resistant, closable, leakproof on sides and bottom, labeled with the BIOHAZARD symbol, and be fluorescent red/orange in color.

Similarly, broken glassware or china should not be picked up using bare hands. The broken item should be cleaned up using a broom and dust pan or mop if needed. Broken glassware does not have to go into a biohazard container unless there is reason to think it is contaminated. It is a good idea to have a "Broken Glass" covered bucket both in the Housekeeping department and the Food & Beverage department where broken glass can be safely disposed.

Disposal

Now the question becomes what to do with the sharps container when it is full; there are several options. Many local medical facilities will accept the sharps containers and incinerate it for you. In some states, such as New York, medical facilities are required by law to accept sharps container from residential locations. You can also contact your hotel's waste disposal company to ascertain if they are certified to dispose of medical waste. Check with your local health department to see if medical waste and sharps disposal are regulated in your state. Currently 21 states have needle safety legislation in place, though the handling and disposal laws vary from state to state.

The easiest option is to participate in a commercial sharps disposal program such as "Sharps by Mail." With this program you purchase from a vendor an approved sharps container. Once the container is $\frac{3}{4}$ full place it in the provided bag and then inside the pre-addressed mailing box provided by the vendor. The purchase price of the container includes the expense to ship the box back to the vendor who will legally dispose of the sharps. Some vendors will also mail back certification for the hotel's records that the sharps were disposed of legally. The greatest advantage to using an established disposal by mail program is the assurance you have that the program will comply with OSHA, federal, state and local regulations. ✧

(Jesse Denton is an independent loss prevention consultant based in Atlanta, GA. Jesse has considerable experience with workplace safety products and programs and, if requested, can help you establish a "Sharps by Mail" program for your hotel. He may be reached via e-mail at: jldentonjr@bellsouth.net or by phone at 678-694-8586.)

