



Media release

9 October 2018

Healthcare Environmental Services slams NHS medical waste decision

Healthcare Environmental Services (HES) today warned that the UK's medical waste backlog will be aggravated by the decision to terminate some of its NHS Trust contracts.

HES said the decision of 15 NHS Trusts to end medical waste disposal contracts was "excessive and counter-productive" and could lead to waste disposal standards being compromised with potential risk to public health.

The company said the decision would lead to waste being transported hundreds of miles to other regions at a greater risk when its specialised vehicles and drivers were ready and willing to assist.

Managing director Garry Pettigrew said: "Our plants around the UK are continuing to store and process medical waste safely and securely to clear any backlog.

"As we have stressed since the outset, there is a proven lack of incineration capacity within the UK, which is affecting all operators.

"The decision of 15 NHS Trusts to serve us termination notices is excessive and counter-productive and will only cause further issues. We are currently discussing next steps with our legal advisers.

"What we have been asking for since January this year is a dispensation to continue the safe storage of medical waste above the agreed limit to enable us to safely dispose of this as quickly as possible.

"We have more than enough capacity to do this and, as the UK Government and the Environment Agency have already noted, there is no risk to public health, as all waste is contained and processed within licensed facilities.

"The irony is that today's decision means that other operators will be given relaxed dispensations to dispose of hazardous waste and that hospitals will also be forced to store waste on site, potentially risking public health.

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“If we’d been granted dispensation, as we requested, this incident would never have arisen. We are talking about a change of permit from 70 tonnes to 300 tonnes, which our premises can currently handle on a 24/7, 365 days a year basis.”

HES stressed that anatomical waste contributes to less than 1% of overall waste collected and it disposed of as a priority.

Mr Pettigrew said: “All anatomical waste is disposed of safely and there are no body parts ‘stockpiled’ at any of our sites, as some reports have alleged. The majority of the waste we are talking about here is plastic.”

HES said the storage issue had been caused by a lack of available high temperature incineration capacity over a number of months resulting in its permit tonnage being breached earlier in the year. When it reached that point, HES informed the Environment Agency.

Mr Pettigrew said there were backlogs at four of its seven plants but said these were all manageable and he anticipated these would have been cleared by the end of December. In contrast, proposals by NHS Improvement (NHSI) would have meant that the waste would be stored outside in unlicensed plants for up to 12 months.

He said: “We have correspondence from a wide range of sources showing a proven lack of incineration capacity across the country which was affecting all operators.

“Our worry is that today’s decision will only make matters worse at other operators, who will be given dispensations to dispose of waste at lower standards than normally expected and that waste will also be stockpiled at hospitals.

“We are aware now that there will be dispensations to allow waste types to be mixed and this will result in non-conforming waste disposal. We are also aware that waste is now being shipped to Birmingham from Yorkshire & Humber as other contractors do not operate specialist vehicles dedicated to this type of waste. There are other incinerators closer than Birmingham which underlines our point that other sites are also experiencing capacity problems.”

HES said that it hoped it would be able to keep its plants running but may have to discuss TUPE transfer of some workers to other operators. Mr Pettigrew added: “We have a great team of people and we are dismayed that their livelihoods are being put at risk by today’s decision.”

This statement is also available on the media section of our website:

<https://www.healthcareenv.com/media>

Ends

Notes to editors:

- HES was established 22 years ago and employs almost 400 staff at seven UK depots. Its headquarters are in Shotts, Lanarkshire.
- It has invested £13m in the Shotts site to build a new waste to energy Pyrolysis facility that it is among the most advanced in the UK.
- HES is the only waste management company in the UK to invest in incineration capabilities in the last 30 years

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