

Northern Rivers Area Health Service
Harm Minimisation Project



Community Sharps Disposal Final Report 2004

Presented by: Northern Solutions

Acknowledgements: Northern Solutions would like to thank the following members of the project team for their contributions:

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Background

The Northern Rivers Area Health Service (NRAHS) established the 'Community Sharps Harm Minimisation Project' to enhance the options for disposal of used sharps used outside the clinical setting.

Community sharps are considered to be those needles and lancets used by members of the community for the administration of drugs and supplements, or for the testing of specific physiological parameters such as blood sugar levels. Inappropriate disposal of these sharps increases the risk of needle stick injury and the potential for the transmission of blood borne infections such as Hepatitis and HIV.

Whilst injecting drug users have historically been perceived as being responsible for community sharps waste that has been inappropriately discarded, there are other significant sub-groups of the population that are using injecting or blood testing equipment outside the clinical setting on a regular basis. These subgroups are based on medical conditions such as diabetes, cancer, blood disorders, multiple sclerosis, Hepatitis C and infertility.

Prior to the implementation of the 'Community Sharps Harm Minimisation Project', there was some confusion and general reluctance for various stakeholders involved with community sharps, to establish uniform guidelines and appropriate facilities for the disposal of such waste. Whilst the NSW Department of Local Government had recommended that Local Government develop strategies for the management and safe disposal of community sharps waste, there was no uniform adoption of this policy amongst Northern Rivers Councils.

Council's hesitation in participating stemmed from the potential impact of comprehensive sharps management plans on waste management budgets combined with a general reluctance at the Local Government level to accept a responsibility that was considered by some to be directly related to the health care agencies rather than the local council.

The result was an inconsistent approach to community sharps disposal across the Northern Rivers area; limited disposal options available to those who generated such waste outside the clinical setting; and the conclusion that a large proportion of such waste was entering the general waste stream.

In response to this inconsistent approach, NSW Health requested that all public hospital sites accept and dispose of community sharps waste. At the same time, a State Reference Committee was established and sought input from all recognised stakeholders to work towards a consistent approach to community sharps waste. The 'Community Sharps Harm Minimisation Project' was conducted at the local level with the broader objectives of the State Reference Committee closely followed. With a shorter timeframe for deliverables, this project was designed to work with all relevant stakeholders in the Northern Rivers Area.

Objectives

The Project was designed to provide direction and, conduct and oversee a Harm Minimisation Project for the NRAHS on the management of household (community) medical waste and related sharps disposal issues with the following primary objectives:

- Enhance effective communication between NRAHS and Local Government organisations
- Develop partnerships with Local Government Organisations in the management of sharps waste
- Develop strategies aimed at improving sharps waste disposal mechanisms in public places
- Support Councils in the development of local strategies incorporating agreed standards for the management of household medical waste and sharps in public places
- Review the availability and current status of household medical waste management practices with particular reference to safe sharps disposal
- Make recommendations on rural model/s of household medical waste management, policies and guidelines
- Implement and manage the NRAHS Harm Minimisation Project
- Develop brochures, flyers and media releases associated with the Project

Proposal

Northern Solutions proposed a program of activities that focused on:

- Mechanisms, systems and/or programs to support consumers who seek out legitimate and safe disposal options; and
- Disposal mechanisms, systems and/or programs to respond to sharps and medical waste related litter in the community

The resultant program consisted of three distinct phases:

- 1) Status Audit and Strategy Development
- 2) Pilot Program Implementation and Model Development
- 3) Final Report and Recommendations

Phase I – Status Audit and Strategy Development

The first phase of status audit was designed to provide the project team with sufficient tools and data to:

- Review the availability and current status of household medical waste management practices with a particular reference to safe sharps disposal in the community
- Evaluate the effectiveness of current NRAHS community waste retrieval systems and the concurrence of practices with current policies and guidelines
- Rapidly assess the current position of individual stakeholders and the potential for stakeholder support for regional strategies or initiatives that fulfil the objectives of the project

The process of this initial stage involved the following key components:

- Development of consultation tools
- Key stakeholder discussions
- Review of existing models
- Local data collection
- Strategy Development

The two key stakeholders identified as part of this project were the NRAHS and Local Government in the Northern Rivers area.

The project team worked closely with the NRAHS personnel to complete the tasks outlined above. Wendi Evans, Jenny Strever and Geoff Sullivan were actively involved in the project throughout all stages. Structured feedback was organised across a range of NRAHS client groups. Through contact with CNC's, Infection Control Nurses, Community Nurses, Pharmacy and Needle Syringe Program staff the project team was able to access data from a range of patient groups who are known to use community sharps on a routine basis (diabetes, renal, blood disorders, vitamin deficiencies, allergies and intravenous drug users). The assistance of the above NRAHS personnel also provided access and structured feedback from the specialist units at Lismore Hospital and all sharps disposal points within the region (hospital and community health sites).

Another key data collection initiative of the project team involved all Local Councils within the Northern Rivers area. Northern Solutions and GeoLink Consultants teamed up to coordinate a series of meetings and structured interviews with key waste management personnel at Local Council offices. This contact was further enhanced through the North East Waste forum and regular telephone and email communications. The initial round of Local Government consultations was designed to rapidly assess the views of individual organisations and the likely acceptance of partnership responsibilities in relation to community sharps disposal.

During these discussions, the project team assessed the current status of Council waste services and any existing sharps collection systems, along with the perception of roles and responsibilities in relation to the issue of community sharps management and any training requirements in this area.

The other key stakeholders that were canvassed during this initial project phase included:

- NSW Health
- Northern Rivers Pharmacies
- North East Waste Forum
- Pharmacy Guild of NSW
- Diabetes Patient Groups
- Diabetes Australia
- Division of General Practice
- Waste Contractors
- Insurance Brokers
- Pathology Groups
- Pharmaceutical Companies

In addition to the wide ranging consultations that were undertaken, the project team reviewed an extensive array of existing models, programs or initiatives (both in NSW and other Australian States) that have been undertaken to address the issue of community sharps waste disposal. This review highlighted key strategies that are currently being used, the extent to which these strategies relied on formal partnerships between agencies (with a particular emphasis on the potential partnership between the NRAHS and Local Government) and any obstacles that had been identified to date.

The project team reviewed local data sources related to the Needle Syringe Program and the 'Needle Clean Up Hotline' operated by NSW Health. Data was generated from local and other Australian data sources to build up a picture of the different disease groups likely to use community sharps outside a normal clinical setting. These figures were used in discussions with key stakeholders. Particular emphasis was given to the Diabetes user groups. This group has a long history of community sharps use and was presented to the key stakeholders as a case study to provide minimum quantity estimates of community sharps usage in the Northern Rivers. These data analyses confirmed that although the use of community sharps was common across the population groups in the region, there was relatively small numbers of these sharps discarded as litter, and a large number of items discarded through the general waste stream. Whilst there is some scope for the disposal of community sharps waste in this way, it is not considered best practice and was not the preference of key stakeholders in relation to the long term solution for waste management in the Northern Rivers. The demonstration of this default pattern of disposal was a key factor in the engagement of Local Council for further discussion and was a key motivating factor in the adoption of some of the project's initiatives.

A summary of the Phase 1 findings was presented to the NRAHS as a presentation and a copy of this is included as Appendix A. Key consultation tools are included as Appendix B.

Strategy

The important factor established by the project team in the first phase of activities was that community sharps users had been exposed to:

- Limited options for disposal;
- Variable costs (in some cases at the same disposal site);
- Inconsistent rulings and procedures;
- Policies that were not underwritten with the principles of harm minimisation;
- Links to intravenous drug uses and sites related to the Needle Syringe Program; and
- Possible increased risk of needle stick injury.

The aim of the proposed strategy developed during the first phase of the project was to provide community sharps users with practical and cost effective waste disposal mechanisms across the Northern Rivers Area.

The specific goals of this strategy being:

- Defined procedures at NRAHS sites
- Improved access to disposal containers
- Increased number of public disposal sites in Local Government areas
- Standard training procedures
- (Needle Clean Up) Hotline protocol
- Increased community awareness of community sharps and their disposal
- Patient information systems
- Stakeholder involvement
- Sustainable financial responsibilities
- Genuine partnership between the key agencies (NRAHS/Local Government)

The project team engaged in specific activities with each of the primary stakeholders:

NRAHS

A series of discussions were held with personnel from the NRAHS to establish prospective involvement and minimum commitments required from the NRAHS to supplement disposal options for the community provide funding to assist Local Government and support training initiatives encouraging the safe and appropriate disposal of community sharps.

It was established during Phase I of the project that all NRAHS sites with disposal facilities should be offering access to these facilities to all community sharps users. However, there was evidence of procedural variability between the sites and practical issues of access, handling and storage.

The NRAHS agreed that existing disposal options, available through the current network of community health centres and hospitals, should be standardised to accept community sharps waste and that internal protocols and guidelines for accepting such waste should be further developed. These facilities are to be provided in addition and separate to the facilities associated with the Needle Syringe Program (NSP).

The extent to which the NRAHS was to establish formal partnerships with Local Government agencies was examined with reference to existing models and the potential for shared financial responsibilities. In some cases, the Area Health Authority and specific Local Government organisations have entered into formal cost sharing arrangements to provide a series of community sharps disposal initiatives. In this situation, and in light of the more recent requirement for Area Health Authorities to provide disposal facilities at hospital and community health sites, the NRAHS resolved to reinforce the partnership principle in line with core service functions and sustainable costs structures.

The NRAHS would provide ongoing contributions to the community sharps disposal network and work with Local Councils to streamline NSP services and impacts. The NRAHS also resolved to provide seed funding for up to two years for individual Councils in the region to assist with the introduction of new disposal facilities or related initiatives.

The partnership principle with local government would be further developed through close collaboration and assistance with training. The NRAHS (through this project) would establish a standard training format that is to be provided to Local Government agencies in the region. Environmental Health personnel from the NRAHS would participate in the delivery and maintenance of these training modules. Other NRAHS personnel will be available for consultation on 'hotspot' management, protocols for the Needle Clean Up Hotline, NSP impacts, disease group contacts and general issues of harm minimisation.

The NRAHS would also look more closely at the NSP and identify regular opportunities to reinforce the principles of safe sharps disposal and conduct specific initiatives to manage incidents of sharps litter and identified litter 'hotspots'.

The NRAHS was also committed to a public launch of the 'Sharp Safe' concept and the improved disposal options established as a result of this project. A mechanism for the removal of community sharps stockpiles was established. Initially, this was to be provided by way of a large scale collection day, however, consultation with Local Government revealed that such an initiative might counter some of the standard disposal messages the project was attempting to establish. The collection of large stockpiles of used sharps was therefore handled on a case by case basis with opportunities for community members to contact the NRAHS directly.

There was a general reluctance to heavily promote the availability of NRAHS disposal sites in the short term due to the expectation that Local Government would initiate activities that would increase the options available to community sharps users. There was also a concern that NRAHS facilities could face increased costs if Local Government initiatives did not eventuate as quickly or to the extent that was anticipated.

Local Government

The key initiative regarding the Local Government agencies and community sharps waste disposal was based on the perceived need for Local Government to recognise the potential role they could play in servicing the needs of the community sharps users. Extensive discussions had taken place over the course of the project to investigate the willingness of Councils to assist with a disposal network for community sharps.

As some Local Councils had previously experienced problems with intravenous drug use in public spaces and the community reaction to initiatives to minimise harm and respond to inappropriate disposal, there was a general reluctance to associate current initiatives with that sub group of users.

However, the key concern of Local Government was the potential economic implications of recognising the broad range of population groups that were required to use community sharps as part of everyday health care practice and establishing complex systems for the collection of such waste.

The project team conducted a series of ongoing discussions with Local Government to reinforce the key findings of the first Phase of the project and establish that much of the community sharps waste already being generated in the community was currently being disposed of via the general waste stream.

The key focus of the team's initiatives at Local Government level was to generate a comprehensive briefing paper (see Appendix C) that could be distributed to Local Government personnel as part of the ongoing collaboration. This paper was customised for each Local Government Area. It not only presented the main findings from the first Phase of the project, but used local data sources and extrapolations from National databases to illustrate the potential waste implications of the typical community sharps user groups in each Local Government area. The paper also detailed the existing models used around NSW and Australia. These data not only helped to reinforce the important role Local Government had in relation to the disposal of community sharps, but presented recommendations regarding the most efficient and politically acceptable initiatives for Councils to embark on.

The recommendations proposed by the project team were based on the concept of pharmacy collection schemes. The willingness of pharmacy owners to participate in such a scheme had been established during the first Phase of the project and the offer of seed funding from the NRAHS then provided further incentive for Local Government agencies to participate. The project team developed a guidelines document (see Appendix D) for Councils to assist in the setting up of such a scheme and to answer 'Frequently Asked Questions'. The project team also developed a generic brochure structure that could be further customised by each Council to provide specific disposal information and along with the standard messages related to harm minimisation and handling sharps safely (see Appendix E).

At the end of the project all Councils had expressed an interest in participating in the Sharps Safe initiative.

Tweed Council already had significant disposal infrastructure in place and some pharmacy collection facilities operating. This was due mainly to the close vicinity to the Gold Coast and a relatively visible intravenous drug user population. Due to some political concerns and existing services, Tweed initially felt that they had provided sufficient contributions to the disposal network. However, in more recent months there has been some indication that these services could be expanded.

Richmond, Byron and Kyogle Councils have both recognised the role and responsibility of Local Government in relation to community sharps disposal at a department level and are continuing to investigate the extent to which the organisations will adopt the recommendations of the project team and utilise the funding offered by the NRAHS.

All other Councils in the Northern Rivers area have established pharmacy collection schemes and are currently accessing the seed funding provided through the project. NRAHS personnel are assisting with initial contractual arrangements and bin size variations are being considered in some situations to match the resultant demand and space requirements of the participating pharmacies.

The other key initiative in relation to the involvement of Local Government in community sharps disposal was the development of a stand alone training package that could be used throughout a Local Government agency to define the role and responsibilities of Council, provide guidelines for the disposal of sharps litter, details of injury response and protocols for the (Needle Clean Up) hotline operated by NSW Health. This package was developed by the project team in conjunction with the NRAHS and input from Local Government during the consultation phase (copies provided separately to NRAHS).

Other Stakeholders

The project team undertook a number of parallel initiatives with other stakeholder groups to further enhance the potential community sharps initiatives:

User groups (diabetes) were informed of the process and reminded of their role in creating the demand for a consistent approach to the issue of community sharps disposal.

Waste contractors that serviced the Northern Rivers were consulted and invited to participate in the launch of the 'Sharp Safe' initiative and to provide detailed cost models to assist Councils and other private land holders in determining the most appropriate contractual relationship to service established disposal facilities.

General practitioners were informed through the Divisions of General Practice of the progress of the project, the initiatives likely to be adopted by Councils, the improvements and modifications made to the disposal network through the involvement of the NRAHS and the opportunities at the primary health care level for patients who may be required to use community sharps to be informed of the options for disposal available in the area (see Appendix F for an example of communications to general practitioners).

Pharmacy operators were canvassed extensively regarding their willingness to participate in disposal initiatives and the impact that may have on their business operations. The project team incorporated this feedback into the guidelines document and provided other printed materials (guidelines for staff and wallet cards for customers) directly to participating pharmacies (See Appendix G) to minimise the impact of disposal services on their business and to ensure the risk of needle stick injury did not increase with more standardised collection procedures.

Public Relations and Awareness Raising

The aim of the public relations campaign was to make the community aware that there were now safe and convenient alternatives for disposing of community sharps.

A two-pronged approach was used to achieve this aim. Firstly, newspaper advertisements were developed (See Appendix H) and placed in each of the newspapers in the Northern Rivers Area, except those that covered the Byron Bay area due to the Council's need for extra time to establish the service. The advertisements announced the launch of Sharp Safe and directed people to call their local council or NRAHS to find the closest location point for disposing of sharps. The newspaper advertisements alerted people to the new services and directed them to council or NRAHS for further information. However, they also commenced the Sharp Safe branding process by introducing the Sharp Safe logo which also appears in participating pharmacy windows.

A media kit (See Appendix I) was sent to all media outlets in the area and discussions held with journalists regarding coverage of Sharp Safe. The majority of media outlets in the area covered the story thus promoting the launch of Sharp Safe and the availability of new disposal facilities.

Conclusion

Prior to the commencement of the 'Sharp Safe' initiative, there was an inconsistent approach to the disposal of community sharps waste across the Northern Rivers area. Whilst there was ongoing debate between agencies as to the respective roles and responsibilities, users of community sharps were faced with limited disposal options, unclear guidelines and variable costs. Other stakeholders were subsequently unable to give users clear and consistent advice in order to ensure disposal practices were safe and the risk of injury was minimised.

One of the key findings established during the activities linked to the 'Sharp Safe' project was the conclusion that previous practices were based on disposal in the general household waste stream and that a significant quantity of used community sharps waste was being routinely deposited in landfill facilities or inadvertently becoming mixed with waste to be sorted for recycling.

The "Sharp Safe" initiative focused on improved access to disposal options for users of community sharps and increased awareness and partnership between the key stakeholders. The relationship between the NRAHS and Local Council is one that is crucial to the ongoing improvement of community sharps management in the Northern Rivers.

At the conclusion of the project, the NRAHS and most Local Councils have agreed to further enhance the disposal options available to community sharps users. Awareness raising initiatives have ensured that other stakeholders and users of community sharps are now informed of the options available and perhaps more importantly, know which agencies to go to for further information or disposal guidelines.

Local Councils will be able to deliver standard training modules on community sharps management throughout their organisations with the periodic assistance of the NRAHS. They will also be able to utilise the seed funding provided to establish new collection facilities.

However, it is vital that the preliminary partnership that has been established between the NRAHS and Local Council is further developed through mutual recognition of core roles and strategic direction and a genuine motivation to assist the users of community sharps in their disposal requirements and minimise the risk of disease transmission in the community.

Recommendations

At this stage of the project there are three key objectives: a) to continually improve access and options for the disposal of community sharps waste; b) maintain and continue to improve the partnership between NRAHS and Local Government; and, c) continue to raise stakeholder awareness of the Sharp Safe concept and the current range of disposal options available to those who use community sharps.

Following are recommendations which will help achieve these objectives:

Funding

The ability of the NRAHS to provide seed funding to Local Government for the establishment of new disposal initiatives was a key factor in encouraging Local Government to participate in the current project. It did however raise some concern amongst Councils that the true budget implications of participation would be hidden for the initial periods and become onerous in the future. Given the size of the predicted community sharp waste load in relation to other waste generated by the community, it is recommended that discussion regarding future disposal services focus on the principles established by this project and the demand of community users. At some point in time Councils will have to factor what could be considered relatively minor costs into future budgets to ensure the community's needs are serviced in partnership with the NRAHS. Additional funding opportunities should be sought by both agencies (either in partnership or isolation) to provide assistance with the provision of standard disposal containers and efficiencies in the system of disposal that can further reduce the overall cost burden on any particular agency.

Funds may also be required for future communication and promotional materials which will be necessary in order to continue to raise and maintain community awareness of sharps safe disposal facilities, procedures, best practice, etc.

Awareness Raising

Due to an ever growing population, number of tourist's visiting the area and new patients being diagnosed with illnesses that require medication by injection there will be an on-going need to regularly remind people of Sharp Safe services.

There are two key ways to achieve this:

- Producing a generic brochure that can be left at medical centres, hotels, motels, community centres, diabetic support groups, etc detailing Sharp Safe services, directing people to ring their local council or the NRAHS service for information on the closest sharp safe disposal centre and providing information on best practice for packaging and disposing of sharps;
- Media stories – Sharp Safe will generate a number of opportunities for media coverage. For example, in a couple of months time a story on the number sharps collected through the Sharp Safe Pharmacy Scheme; number of pharmacies involved and why they support the service; comments from diabetics about convenience and safety of a pharmacy scheme, etc

Ongoing Training

It is recommended that NRAHS hold train the trainer courses at least annually for council staff. This will provide NRAHS with an opportunity to update people on the latest information and continue to develop the partnership with local government. Once key council staff is trained they will be in a position to run Sharp Safe courses throughout the year at times that are convenient for their staff and new recruits.

User Demand

Historically, much of the public discussion about disposal facilities has centred on the intravenous drug user population and the controversy surrounding the location and objectives of the associated services (NSP). The project team has established that a diverse group of community members use sharps outside the normal clinical setting for the treatment of health conditions and that this subgroup has disposal needs that should be serviced by the current public infrastructure. It is recommended that regular contact with user groups be initiated and maintained and that these user groups are encouraged to seek out improved access to disposal options.

Internal Procedures (NRAHS)

There will be an on-going need to educate NRAHS staff about sharps disposal, policies, facilities, safe handling, contact numbers, procedures, etc. This can be done in a number of ways, including briefing management, articles in staff newsletters, re-issuing policies and guidelines relevant to sharps disposal at regular intervals, and including information in staff induction manuals.

Regular Council Liaison

To maintain and improve the relationship between local government and NRAHS it is recommended that email updates are generated periodically (ideally, every three months) briefing staff on Sharps news. An update could contain information on the number of sharps collected through the pharmacy collection scheme, advice on managing hotspots, new pharmacies joining Sharp Safe, dates for train the trainer courses, feedback from people who use the pharmacy collection scheme, updates on the injury hotline, etc

Proactive Hot Spot Management

The ability of the NRAHS to assist with the management of litter 'hot spots' is another example of ways in which the NRAHS can provide additional services to Councils as a demonstration of the Area's commitment to the issue of community sharps disposal and an indication of the value brought to the process by a partnership approach. Regular monitoring of data sources, contact with key personnel and specific consulting initiatives by NRAHS staff can help to identify problem areas early and can assist Council's greatly in resolving litter problem areas in high use public spaces. The Councils should also be encouraged to utilise the expertise and experience of NRAHS personnel in the design of public spaces and facilities to minimise the impact of intravenous drug user populations and navigate the political landscape when disposal facilities are planned.

Data Management

Data collection initiatives should be encouraged within the guidelines presented by the project team. NRAHS should attempt to identify the existence of specific mechanisms throughout the region and assist in the regular dissemination of these data as part of regular area wide updates. Conversely, agencies responsible for individual databases should be encouraged to identify action points and referral scenarios so that the implications of data collection mechanism on other agencies can be identified and acted upon should the need arise. Once again, the principle of area wide partnerships can be further enhanced by efficient use of data collection mechanisms and agreed action points should certain data demand a response.

Media Relations

As well as providing the media with story angles to promote Sharp Safe initiatives and disposal facilities, additional opportunities will also become available to raise awareness of the initiative. A recent example of this was the needle stick injury incident in the Lismore sports park. Whilst the media focused on the negative side of this unfortunate incident it presented NRAHS, who were asked to comment, with an opportunity to state the range of initiatives in place to reduce the likelihood of such an incident, i.e. Needle Clean Up Hotline, Sharp Safe project, new options for disposal of sharps, safe handling of sharps, etc. It is therefore recommended that three or four key messages are developed in preparation for future media interviews.

Stakeholder Survey

At the completion of the first year of Sharp Safe it is recommended that key stakeholders, such as councils, participating pharmacies and diabetic support groups, be surveyed to obtain feedback on this new initiative. The object of the survey would be to identify issues, concerns and benefits related to the Sharp Safe initiative.

Participation in State Reference Group

The project team recognises that the current deliberations and outputs from the State Reference Group may provide direction and initiatives in addition to the recommendations presented above. The project was conducted with a local emphasis and encourages the development of high level, state wide initiatives that may further reduce the burden of community sharps waste or increase the efficiency and cost effectiveness of disposal systems.