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## EMB faces COVID waste disposal crisis

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In response to Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu's directive to anticipate the increased volume of infectious wastes during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Environmental Management Bureau has issued guidelines on the issuance of special permits to transport medical wastes during the Enhanced Community Quarantine period.

EMB Memorandum Circular Nos. 2020-14, 15 and 16, signed by EMB OIC-Director Engr. William P. Cuñado, direct the simplification of processing SPTTs by registered transporters and existing transport, storage and disposal facilities, "pursuant to the need for continuity of operations in the field of public health and safety."

Transporters with SPTT are exempted from the travel ban to ensure that the collection and transportation of pathological and infectious wastes for treatment is unhampered.

Per the guidelines, the EMB seeks "to continuously monitor the transportation, storage, and disposal of hazardous wastes in order to avoid environmental contamination; and to provide temporary protocols for waste generators, transporters, and treaters, local government units, law enforcement authorities, and other stakeholders in the smooth implementation of proper hazardous waste management."

Collection of fees for the issuance of SPTTs during the ECQ period is also suspended, provided that all requirements are complete and the fees will be paid once regular business operations in the EMB resume.

Transporters and TSD facilities with existing M501 permits or registration certificates expiring during the ECQ period enjoy an automatic extension of their licenses for a period of up to 60 days and that application for renewal shall be "immediately done within five days as soon as the ECQ is lifted."

EMB-3 Regional Director Wilson L. Trajeco informed the Manila Standard that his office has approved SPTTs for a little over 9,000 metric tons of medical wastes, as of April 11. He said that once the requirements are complete, approval and issuance of the SPTT takes more or less only one hour.

Applications are done through the EMB's Online Permitting System and approval is also coursed through electronic mail to the applicant.

In anticipation of the possible peak of the pandemic after the ECQ period, Trajeco recommends the application of these interim guidelines for as long as there are cases of COVID-19 patients. Most of the country's infectious wastes are being treated in Region 3 or Central Luzon, according to a report furnished by the EMB-3 to Manila Standard.

Aside from those in the Region, health care facilities in Metro Manila, Regions 1, 4A, 6, and 11 all transport their infectious wastes to Central Luzon for treatment and disposal. At present, there are four existing TSD facilities in the Region: Safewaste, Inc., Udenna Environmental Services Inc., Total Organic Environmental Solutions, Inc., and Cleanway Environmental Management Solutions, Inc.

All of them are mandated to treat infectious wastes in compliance with the Clean Air Act of 1999, which prohibits incineration, and the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000 for final disposal of treated medical waste in a sanitary landfill facility.

According to Christopher Tang, Business Development Director of Safewaste Inc., they use the no-burn thermal disinfection, or autoclaving, method whereby wastes are treated at temperatures of up to 140 degrees Centigrade using steam and heat to kill germs, viruses and other pathogens. However, Tang noted that the volume of medical wastes coming into their facility decreased as small waste generators, such as diagnostic clinics, which are prolific in the Region, have ceased operations. Meanwhile, dialysis centers, rural health units, in addition to hospitals, are still operating.

While some health care facilities do not label their wastes, Tang said that they consider all medical wastes during the ECQ period as related to COVID-19 and that they take necessary precautions in order to protect their own personnel and the public in collecting and treating such wastes.

Health care waste management involves segregation, collection, transportation, treatment and waste disposal.

Louie Dimalanta, infectious control nurse at the AUF Medical Center in Angeles City, Pampanga, said that protective equipment and other medical wastes used in treating COVID-19 patients are stored in containers and placed a separate area in the hospital.

Dimalanata said that they disinfect these wastes thoroughly before collection by the transporter, and disinfect the entire room again once emptied.

According to the 2017 World Health Organization study paper, around 85 percent of waste produced by health care providers is similar to household wastes and are typically classified as “non-hazardous” or “general health care wastes.”

The bulk of wastes mostly comes from administrative, kitchen and housekeeping functions of these health care providers.

The remaining 15 percent is considered as “hazardous” and can pose a number of health and environmental risks.

According to WHO, “Poor management of health-care waste exposes health-care workers, waste handlers and the community to infections, toxic effects and injuries,” adding that there is also potential for drug-resistant microorganisms of being released into the environment due to poor handling of health-care wastes.”

The most hazardous type of medical waste are sharps, specifically needles, because of the possible pathogens that they carry from an infected person such as, HIV, Hepatitis C and B and now, the novel coronavirus.

According to DOH data, there are around 48 hospitals in Central Luzon, in addition to other health care facilities, such as rural health units.

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