

Go Green: How to Create Eco-friendly Infection Control Practices

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Issue: In the United State alone, 251 million tons of municipal solid waste (MSW), more commonly known as trash, is generated annually by residents, businesses and institutions. Research has indicated that plastic alone has become one of the most harmful waste products to the environment. A 'plastic soup' of waste twice the size of the continental United States, is floating in the Pacific Ocean and growing at an alarming rate. In a typical dental practice, trash consists of disposable syringes and air/water tips, surface barriers, patient bibs, cups, dappan dishes and saliva ejectors; all of which contain a nonbiodegradable plastic. Plastic has been associated with breast cancer, genital deformities, and low sperm counts; essentially due to its nonbiodegradable nature.

Project: This project proposes to examine current infection control practices, offer eco-friendly alternatives and provide resources that can assist the dental practice in evaluating and supporting the alternatives.

Results: A review of the literature indicates that health professionals need to consider the impact of its trash on the health and wellness of the environment. Dentistry has the opportunity to be the vanguard in reducing the amount of harmful waste that is being generated while maintaining the principles of infection control. Currently there are limited numbers of dental practices that adhere to the 'green principles', but the few that have, are successful. Managing disposable equipment such as air/water tips, prophylaxis paste cups, patient bibs, cups, dappan dishes, saliva ejectors and surface barriers can be achieved in an eco-friendly manner. Perhaps dental and dental hygiene schools can be in the forefront preparing graduates who are ready to adopt 'eco-friendly' infection control practices.

Lessons learned: Lessening the amount of plastics in dental waste can and should be done. Strategies can be developed to start small and work up to greater elimination. There are agencies, organizations, companies and individuals willing to assist the dental community in this endeavor.