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COVID-19 healthcare waste expose urgent need to improve waste management systems: WHO

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The COVID-19 waste challenge and increasing urgency to address environmental sustainability offer an opportunity to strengthen systems to safely and sustainably reduce and manage health care waste



Tens of thousands of tonnes of extra medical waste from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has put tremendous strain on health care waste management systems around the world, threatening human and environmental health and exposing a dire need to improve waste management practices, according to a new report by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

As the United Nations (UN) and countries grappled with the immediate task of securing and quality-assuring supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), less attention and resources were devoted to the safe and sustainable management of COVID-19 related health care waste.

Today, 30% of healthcare facilities (60% in the least developed countries) are not equipped to handle existing waste loads, let alone the additional COVID-19 load. The report lays out a set of recommendations for integrating better, safer, and more environmentally sustainable waste practices into the current COVID-19 response and future pandemic preparedness efforts.

Recommendations include using eco-friendly packaging and shipping, safe and reusable PPE (e.g., gloves and medical masks), recyclable or biodegradable materials; investment in non-burn waste treatment technologies, such as autoclaves; reverse logistics to support centralized treatment and investments in the recycling sector to ensure materials, like plastics.