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Press release

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Need for better management of hospital waste

An Audit Scotland report published today says that, whilst progress has been made since 2001, NHS boards and hospitals are still not managing hospital waste as well as they could. In particular they need to increase their recycling and ensure they sort and store all waste properly. These measures would contribute to a better environment, improve safety and reduce rising costs.

Deputy Auditor General, Caroline Gardner, says:

“It is encouraging that progress has been made in managing hospital waste. However there is still much more to be done, and NHS boards and hospitals need to make improvements now to safeguard both the environment and the safety of staff and patients.”

Hospital wards are the biggest producers of both domestic and clinical waste in the NHS. Waste generated by hospitals includes domestic waste, such as paper, cardboard and flowers, and clinical waste, such as used needles and bandages.

Following Audit Scotland's first report (*Waste management in Scottish hospitals*, published June 2001) the Scottish Executive introduced national policies, guidelines, and detailed action plans to improve hospital waste management.

However these recommendations have not yet been fully implemented by all NHS boards and hospitals. They have made progress in developing policies, appointing waste management officers and in recycling, but there are still key areas where improvements are needed.

The report highlights:

- More domestic waste needs to be recycled. At the time of our audit almost two thirds of hospitals in our survey did not have a hospital-wide paper recycling scheme and more than half did not have one for cardboard. A quarter of hospitals had neither. However many NHS boards are now in discussion with councils, other public sector partners or private firms to explore the recycling options available to them. The introduction of new environmental regulations and legislation will increase the costs of hospital waste disposal and add to the pressure on hospitals to improve their recycling.
- Spot-checks highlighted instances at 15 of the hospitals in our sample survey of 53 hospitals where clinical waste was not secure from public access. Boards need to make sure that all clinical waste is stored securely away from areas of public access.
- Waste management costs the NHS around £8 million each year, and is likely to rise with new legislative and regulatory requirements. The cost of clinical waste disposal could be reduced by about £1.3 million if hospitals sorted waste properly.

For further information contact Anne McCubbin tel: 0131 624 9970 or Alexis Burnett tel: 0131 624 9974

Notes to editors

1/ Our sample survey was of 53 hospitals and audit work was carried out in the audit year 2003/04 (October 2003 to September 2004).

2/ Details of spot checks of clinical waste can be found in Exhibit 2 of the report. (page 10)

Audit Scotland provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission

3/ Clinical waste needs to be treated and costs about £300 per tonne more per year to dispose of than domestic waste, which does not need treatment.

4/ Recent legislative and regulatory changes affecting hospitals' waste management are outlined in Appendix 2 of the report.

5/ All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website. Go to www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

6/ The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.

7/ Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.