

# **BIO-HAZARDOUS WASTE: A CRIME SCENE PERSPECTIVE**

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As crime scene technicians perform their daily duties what bio-hazards are they encountering? How are they safely disposing of the contaminated items? What are bio-hazards in relation to crime scene processing? What could be hazardous to his health or the health of others?

All of these questions have two points in common. The safety of people and the civil liability of police departments, including their officers and supervisors.

First the issue of "What is bio-hazardous in crime scenes? Think about the last time you entered a Death Investigation scene where there was blood everywhere. How did you enter that scene? No matter how much blood there was on the floor you probably stepped in it, transferring the blood to your shoes. When you left the crime scene where did you go? Everywhere you went you ran the risk of transferring that blood onto other items. What bio-hazard is this? Simply put, you just ran the risk of transferring communicable diseases to others not even associated with the crime scene.

O.K., You wore protective coverings on your shoes and you wore protective clothing, including disposable latex gloves to protect yourself from contamination and from contaminating the scene. Disposable is the key word here. Where did you dispose of those items? Were they placed in a container clearly marked as bio-hazardous waste or did you find the closest trash container and throw them away?

What about all the utensils that you used in processing this scene? The pipettes, scissors, razor blades, tweezers, etc. What did you do with those items? Did you "dispose" of them or clean them with antiseptics before leaving the scene? Or did you just throw them back into your evidence kit awaiting the next scene.

Unfortunately we as crime scene technicians have little or no knowledge of the health of the victim we come into contact with. There are no standard tests performed on the victims to see if they are carriers of communicable diseases, so we rely on certain safety precautions to prevent coming into contact with the many diseases prevalent in our work. But what do we do with the contaminated waste from the crime scenes?

Health-wise we are creating a possible catastrophe by leaving behind our waste products at the crime scene or improperly disposing of the material elsewhere.

Let's use the following scenario as an example: You just finished processing a homicide scene in a residential area. All the waste was carefully placed inside of one container at the crime scene. You wore protective gear and you were very cautious not to contaminate yourself or others in the residence. The last thing you do at the crime scene is throw away the contaminated articles in the trash can or dumpster in the alley behind the residence. The next day a small child is rooting through the trash containers to find aluminum cans. He comes across YOUR contaminated trash and he opens the bag cutting himself on the "disposable" razor blade you used in the crime scene. He also finds in the same bag several aluminum pop cans. He takes the whole bag home and separates the "junk" from the aluminum cans. In this bag are also papers and documents which identify the victim and your department. The boy tells his mother he has cut himself on the contents and requires nothing more than a band-aid. However, the next day the mother opens the newspaper to see headlines telling the public of a homicide involving two AIDS victims at the residence where her son found his "treasure". Where does that leave you and your department? In a liability nightmare. Can you imagine the headlines of the next edition of that newspaper?

### ***"POLICE RESPONSIBLE FOR SMALL CHILD CONTRACTING AIDS"***

This is only a small sample of the bio-hazardous waste that we tend to leave at the crime scenes. What about the fingerprint powders or the chemicals that we use in these scenes? Who is responsible for the clean up after we leave the scene?

There must be departmental procedures for the proper disposal of bio-hazardous waste from crime scenes. The waste needs to be placed in specially marked containers and properly discarded. One avenue for the departments to consider is contacting their crime laboratory personnel to discover how they dispose of hazardous waste. Another source for disposal is the local hospital.

Whatever the means, you must properly dispose of the bio-hazardous waste from crime scenes or you and your department run the risk of health hazards and the possibility of being held liable for others becoming injured from this waste.

Don't wait for your department to become today's headlines. Take the appropriate action now to protect yourself and your department from the health and liability problems associated with bio-hazardous waste from the crime scene.