



Setting European Standards

Dr Anne Woolridge, chair of ISWA's Healthcare Waste Working Group and vice chair of CIWM's Healthcare Waste Special Interest Group, looks at the development of a European vocational training programme for healthcare waste managers

The European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme ran from 2007-2013 with the aim of supporting vocational education and training. It brought European partners together to improve training, skills and employability. This was replaced in 2014 by Erasmus+, which brings together the previous funding streams of Leonardo [with which you may be familiar through articles in this journal], Erasmus, Comenius and Grundtvig and Transversal to name a few. Erasmus+ will run until 2020 and aims to boost skills and employability as the previous programme did. One project that has received funding from Erasmus+ is that to develop an EU standardised approach to vocational qualifications in healthcare waste management. The plan is to develop a new healthcare waste management qualification framework and e-learning platform.

Rapid Changes

HEALTHCARE WASTE management is a rapidly changing field and new developments are occurring on a regular basis. The ultimate aim of this project is to provide a unified approach to healthcare waste management training within the broader EU labour force. This will ensure that individuals will have the appropriate skills to work as a healthcare waste manager, regardless of the member state that they undertook the vocational training programme in. It should give future employers the confidence that when they employ someone with the qualification, they will be trained to bench-marked standard.

There are 12 partner organisations drawn from across Europe. The project is being led by the International Centre for the Environment, Resource Management and Sustainability Ltd (ICERMS), which is based in Scotland. ISWA is one of the partners, but more specifically the technical expertise is being supplied by two members of the Healthcare Waste Working Group: myself and Ed Krisiunas, President of WNNW International based in Burlington, Connecticut. The previous chair of the Healthcare Waste Working Group, Jan Gerd Kuhling, is not representing ISWA as his company Etlog Health GmbH is the project partner representing Germany. The other partners are:

- Società Consortile a responsabilità limitata (SINERGIE) – a not-for-profit training and research centre based in Emilia-Romagna, northern Italy
- The Institute of Environmental Protection – National Research Institute, a governmental institute based in Poland and supervised by the Polish Ministry of the Environment
- SIGMA Consultants Ltd – an independent engineering and design consultancy based in Greece
- The Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe is an international organisation that provides assistance in solving environmental problems by promoting co-operation among governments, NGOs, businesses and other environmental stakeholders. Partners on the project are from the country offices of Macedonia and Slovenia.

- Club EMAS is an association of The European Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) registered organisations in Catalonia
- The National Centre for Continuing Education – based in Albania and is the public agency that supports the system of professional development for healthcare professionals
- Representing England, Wales and Northern Ireland is the NHS Confederation – the membership body that commissions and provides NHS services. The members include acute care trusts, ambulance trusts, community health service providers, mental health service providers, primary care providers, foundation trusts... the list goes on
- The European Union of Private Hospitals – based in Brussels and represents 4500 private hospitals across Europe.

Even though healthcare waste is very heavily regulated across Europe, there are a range of levels of waste management depending on national strategy and infrastructure. This project is seen as an opportunity to improve the skills of the existing workforce, as well as training people in the appropriate skills prior to them entering the sector.

Getting Started

THE KICK-OFF meeting was held in Largs, Scotland in February and was attended by representatives of all the partners. In addition to the standard administrative discussions that always take place at meetings like this, it was an opportunity for each attending nation to present an overview of waste management in their own county.

There will undoubtedly be challenges in a project of this nature, especially when there are such wide variations in the way the European legislation has been interpreted. There are also climatic and geographic differences that have an effect on the systems that can be realistically be introduced.

One of the initial investigations is to establish the current vocational educational training programmes available across the EU countries; it is anticipated that this will be limited to those member states participating in the research. An assessment of the key skills required by a healthcare waste manager will also be made. The final outputs will be the development of an e-learning platform that facilitates the remote delivery of the training programme. The content of the programme will be developed based on the research undertaken earlier in the project and the knowledge of the individuals in the partner organisations.

The role of the technical experts from the Healthcare Waste Working Group of ISWA in this project is to be part of the monitoring and evaluation system. The technical content will be

checked to ensure that it is in line with the current legislative regime for Europe and is unbiased. It is very easy when there are a number of contributors with personal experiences in the field to sometimes concentrate too much on the fine detail, whilst losing sight of the bigger picture.

Another important role that ISWA will play is that of dissemination. ISWA is an international not-for-profit association that represents the whole waste sector. One of its key functions is organising sector-leading waste events, such as ISWA World Congress, Beacon Conferences, workshops and seminars. It also works closely with the World Health Organisation (WHO); about half the working group members contributed to the 2013 revision of the *WHO Safe Management of Wastes from Healthcare Activities* (2nd Edition).

The managing director of ISWA, Herman Koller; the communications manager, Gerfried Habenicht; and the technical manager, Rachael Williams are the key members of staff named in the project. However, given the vast expertise across the team in ISWA there will inevitably be input from other members of staff.

There are a range of benefits in better trained healthcare waste management staff. There should be improvements in the way waste is managed, which will increase compliance with the member state regulations. Once compliance is achieved there should be associated financial and environmental benefits too. It should also enable an improved choice of available technologies as informed decisions will be made from an evidence base. It is important to remember that in the UK healthcare waste is not managed in a typically European way and this training will be applicable to existing EU members and Accession states.

Currently in a number of member states waste is managed directly by the hospitals themselves, rather than the scenario we see in the UK. In the majority of cases in the UK, waste management companies are contracted to take the waste away from hospitals and treat it or incinerate it on a commercial scale at permitted sites. Where hospitals are not only generating, classifying and segregating the waste, but also treating it or disposing of it, a training programme of this nature is meeting a very real need. This project runs from 2014-2017, so Europe will not be awash with fully trained healthcare waste managers just yet, but watch this space... **CIWM**

Scott Crossett of ICERMS will be presenting an overview of the project and progress so far at The University of Northampton's Healthcare Waste and Resources Research Group Seminar on 25 September at the Bywaters Recycling Facility in East London. For more information please contact terry.tudor@northampton.ac.uk

For more information on Erasmus+ visit http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_en.htm



The Author

In addition to the roles already mentioned, Dr Anne Woolridge is technical director of Independent Safety Services Limited. She has an MSc in Environmental Management with a focus on healthcare wastes and a PhD in developing sustainable management for healthcare waste and is a Chartered Waste Manager. She has been a consultant for more than four years and, in addition to a wealth of technical knowledge, she also has practical experience of waste management in acute, primary and tertiary cares in both the public and private sectors.