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## THE BUSINESS REVIEW

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# EPA goes after hospital pollution

The Business Review (Albany) - by [Allison Connolly](#) For The Business Review

**The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** promises to get tougher on hospitals, enforcing waste- and mercury-reduction standards either by voluntary or punitive means.

The agency's goal is to eliminate mercury from medical waste by 2005. It also hopes to reduce the total volume of waste generated by hospitals and other health care facilities by one-third by 2005 and half by 2010. And while the **EPA** has had the cooperation of the American Hospital Association in the effort, the AHA may be thinking of breaking off that relationship, according to a memo obtained by the Boston Business Journal.

But, at least for now, it appears the initiative, known as Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, will continue to encourage hospitals to meet those standards. And the program could be a wake-up call for many hospitals, which previously avoided much scrutiny from the EPA compared to other industries.

"The EPA hasn't really targeted hospitals before, so this is a new initiative," said Margaret Quinn, director of the disclosure rules Sustainable Hospitals Project at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

Hospitals are the second-largest dioxin polluter in the country, and the fourth-largest of mercury, said Bill Ravanese, Boston campaign director for Washington, D.C.-based Health Care Without Harm, a coalition of 250 organizations campaigning for environmentally friendly hospitals and providers.

EPA administrator Christie Whitman is expected to sign off soon on a 10-year study of dioxin pollution, which Ravanese said will undoubtedly implicate hospitals.

"That is going to bring a lot of attention to it," he said.

A Massachusetts Hospital Association spokeswoman said most hospitals have compliance officers inhouse. No Bay State hospitals have been fined by the EPA in recent years, according to spokeswoman Amy Miller in the EPA's Region 1 office, which covers New England. However, local hospitals have been fined by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection for dumping mercury in water. Ravanese said the fines ranged from \$40,000 to six figures each.

"The major hospitals in Boston, from 1995 until now, have worked very diligently on [reducing]

mercury in effluent water," Ravanese said. "We're hopeful they will do the same with dioxin." Dioxin is one of the most toxic chemicals known, and the EPA describes it as a serious public health threat.

The Hospitals for a Healthy Environment standards recently issued by the EPA are voluntary, at least for now. So far, hospitals have cooperated with the agency, said Tom Murray, of the pollution prevention division at the EPA's Washington, D.C., headquarters.

**The AHA** confirmed its commitment to the program in late June, according to the EPA, but there are persistent rumblings that it is having second thoughts. A major national hospital network sent a letter, which was obtained by the Business Journal and dated June 11, that urges the AHA to stick with the EPA program.

An AHA spokeswoman said she wasn't aware of any such alleged rumblings and referred all questions about the program to the EPA, which stressed the hospital association's commitment.

It is one of the first EPA initiatives for hospitals since the environmental agency issued regulations regarding hospital incinerators in 1997. Most incinerators in the state have since closed.

"Environmental issues haven't been on hospitals' radar screens because they are so under siege from other areas, with all the mergers happening," Quinn said.

Attorney Jessica Graf, who received the alert, said her Boston law firm, Nixon Peabody LLP, is scheduling workshops this fall for health care providers to school them on compliance issues.

"A good environmental result is a good business result, and health care facilities are run like a business," Graf said.

Graf encourages hospitals and health care providers to hire compliance officers or conduct self-audits to make sure they are prepared for EPA inspectors.

"Even if you were to spend in the low five figures to do an audit, it's worth it to avoid a significant fine in the future," Graf said.

It's an education process, Quinn said. "Some of it is in low enough quantities that mercury isn't even on the label, so hospitals don't even know they're using it," Quinn said.

*Allison Connelly is a staff reporter for the Boston Business Journal.*

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