

MEDICAL WASTE

A danger to public health

SYED TASHEEN CHOWDHURY

Medical organisations like hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres are constantly polluting the environment and endangering public health with a wide range of medical waste.

"These organisations dispose of medical waste on roads, dustbins, drains and any open space available in the absence of laws or policies governing such actions," said Tarit Kanti Biswas, project co-ordinator, Hospital Waste Management Project, Prism Bangladesh, an expert in waste management.

Biswas pointed out that over 200 tonnes of waste is produced daily from numerous hospitals, clinics and other medical service providing organisations.

"Officially around 600 such organisations operate in the city. Most of them use their own sweepers or staff. These ignorant staff members usually throw away the waste in bins or on the streets," he said.

The waste is then picked up by Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) vehicles and deposited at the dumping grounds. This waste then mixes with normal household garbage.

"The system is hazardous and poses a serious threat to the environment and city-dwellers. Hospital wastes are required to be treated separately," said Milton, a senior official of Prism Bangladesh.

Prism Bangladesh, an NGO, initiated 'the Hospital Waste Management Project' in February

2004, financially supported by the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP).

"We received a one acre plot in Matuail from DCC to initiate our waste management plant" Biswas said.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) provided vehicles and assistance for the plant construction.

According to Prism officials, medical wastes are broadly of seven types.

General waste consists of food items, infectious waste like tissues, amputated limbs. Surgical waste that result from operations and treatment of patients.

Sharp waste consisting of used syringe, glass, and needles, along with liquid waste that of blood, mucus and body fluids.

Then comes plastic or recyclable waste, followed by chemical and pharmaceutical waste, which consist of medicines or chemicals used in laboratories.

"Radioactive waste is not produced extensively in the city, but there is a certain percentage of it too," said Biswas.

Prism officials said they were concerned of the various ways by which such waste could affect the environment and health of city-dwellers.

"In the West, waste is classified and quarantined accordingly. Such is not the case in Bangladesh," said a Prism official.

The official said that 70 per cent of medical waste dumped in the local dustbins is infectious.

"Waste like used syringes, gloves

and others are picked by scavengers. These are later sold to unknowing patients or their family members at a price lower than the price of an average syringe or pair of gloves," said Biswas.

Infectious waste, at one time was dumped into garbage landfills of the city.

"Such waste decomposes with time and may seep into underground water supplies, cultivated lands contaminating soil and water," he said.

Gross incineration of this waste also causes pollution.

In their fight against this growing menace the organisation has, till now oriented around 680 employees from hospitals and medical service providing organisations of DCC Ward 49 and 57, about the 'Hazards of Medical waste'.

"As most clinics are located in these two areas, we decided to initiate our pilot project here," said a Prism official, adding that 40 hospitals and clinics have been trained since its launch.

"We first provided training free of cost, but most hospital authorities still ignored the training we provided," said Biswas.

"Most hospitals and clinics still hesitate to utilise our services as they have to spend more to implement our methods, but they agree that the methods are absolutely safe," he added.

He also said that most hospital authorities are consistently dumping medical waste consciously as a strict law concerning the issue is yet to be enacted.

Biswas also urged the need for an incinerator, which can reduce the volume of medical waste produced by these medical organisations.

"We have successfully reached our primary goal of raising awareness and training a significant amount of hospitals about the

towards medical organisations and services," said Solaiman Haider, Assistant Director, Industrial Pollution, Department of Environment.

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hazards caused by medical waste in these two wards. With support from DCC and other organisations, we hope to initiate a bigger project soon, which will cover other parts of the city," he said.

When contacted, senior officials of the Department of Environment stated that though there is an existing law concerning waste and pollution, a definite law against medical waste is yet to be formulated.

"The law states that every organisation, government or non-government, should dispose of their waste properly. But we do not have a law solely focussed

experts say such topics are yet to be added in the local medical curriculum.

"Most doctors, nurses, matrons and staff of hospitals and clinics are unaware of such waste management though it is very necessary," said a doctor of Sir Salimullah Medical College, under condition of anonymity.

"It is about time that concerned authorities propose, pass and enact a law and add courses to the existing medical curriculum to fight this increasingly dangerous menace to national environmental and health," said Biswas.



Used blood bags being emptied for reuse later just outside Pongu Hospital in Dhaka.

Law against welding on streets ignored



Welding work going on in the open at a workshop in Gulshan.

SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

NOVERA DEEPTA

Welding has been a common practice in the roadside workshops and under-construction buildings in the city despite the fact that existing laws restrict such activities in the public places and residential areas.

Selina Raihan, a student of North South University, said: "Welding is a common public nuisance in buildings under construction on Kemal Ataturk Avenue. The flames caused by welding can hurt us any time when we pass through the road."

"It is unbelievable that the authorities concerned remain silent about such illegal practices on a busy road," she said.

There is no data available about the number of accidents caused by welding, but according to Penal Code 1980, such activities are considered as public nuisance.

Section 268 of the Penal Code

1980 says: 'A person is guilty of public nuisance who does any act of an illegal omission which causes any common injury, danger or annoyance to the public or to the people in general who dwell or occupy property in the vicinity, or which must necessarily cause injury, obstruction, danger or annoyance to persons who may have occasion to use any public right.'

Bahreen Khan, a senior advocate of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) said: "The owners of the multi-storey buildings, shop owners and construction workers are well informed about the law. But they are still doing it because they usually get away with doing it by paying a little amount of fine that is not more than Tk500."

"There is hardly any strict enforcement of these provisions of the law that ensures punishment of such public

nuisance. An amendment is a must for the Penal Code because the punishment of such crime is as little as Tk 50," she added.

Health hazards from welding, cutting and brazing operations include exposures to metal fumes and ultraviolet radiation. Safety hazards from these operations include burns, eye damage, electrical shock, cuts, and crushed toes and fingers. Many of these can be controlled with proper work practices and personal protective equipment.

But most of the people involved in these jobs are either unaware of these hazards or reluctant to follow the law.

Momena Haque, the owner of an under-construction house, said: "It is very expensive and troublesome if we take our doors or windows to any other places for welding. It is convenient for us to do the welding in the building."

Monir Hossain, the owner of an open welding shop in Dhanmondi, is involved in this business for the last 22 years. "I know welding in open places is against the law but I don't have any choice. I have to do it at my roadside shop like all other welding shops in the city. I cannot afford an enclosed place for welding."

"The house owners or pedestrians never gave objection. I never paid any fine because no accident occurred in my shop. I gave my employees special glasses and helmets for protection but most of them are reluctant to use them," he added.

A high official of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, on condition of anonymity, said: "To ensure the implementation and enforcement of these laws we need more manpower. We have many more serious offences to check. So, it is difficult to check all these trivial crimes or disorders with the insufficient number of manpower."

Swindling the innocent

IMRUL HASAN

A good number of fake savings and credit organisations in the city are cheating thousands of poor and unlettered people with the assurance of high interest against their deposits.

On December 23, 2005, the officials of Pan Islamic Multipurpose Co-operative Society (PMC) at Mohammadia Housing Society in Mohammadpur went into hiding with more than Tk 50 lakh they collected from around 20,000 members.

"I became a member of PMC in July last year and gave them all the money I saved from my daily earning," said Ruhul Kuddus, a beggar at Mohammadia Housing Society.

"I did not hesitate to deposit the money as the PMC officials assured me of attractive return against my deposit," he said. "Now I have lost everything."

Three years ago, PMC introduced several savings schemes with a commitment to give the members double the amount they deposit, after a period of three years.

"It also gave loans to the interested depositors on soft terms. Finding all these proposals very lucrative, over 20,000 men and women became its members," said Lutfur Rahman, another victim from Katasur in Mohammadpur.

Everything was going on smoothly. The problem began when the depositors started coming to the PMC office on completion of three years for collecting the 'double amount' as committed by the PMC officials.

"One fine morning we found the PMC office under lock and key," said another victim. "All the officials of the fake organisation fled with the deposited money."

The depositors went to police and urged them to arrest the culprits. "We filed a

case against the PMC," said Nusrat Ali, a victim from Adabor.

The police so far arrested three staff of PMC, Faysal, Sohel and Russell.

"The depositors being deprived of loans complained against the organisation and we arrested the three," said Shafiqul Islam, second officer of Adabor Police Station.

On December 25, 2005, a similar incident occurred at Mir Hazirbagh in Demra.

Hundreds of people took to the street and blocked the Jatrabari-Sayedabad road demanding the arrest of a man, a so-called journalist, who took money from these people assuring them of giving returns with high interest.

The accused, Giasuddin Ahmed, runs three newspapers, locals said.

"Giasuddin opened an NGO named 'Property Development' and promised

us plots and apartments. We went to his office on that day (Dec 25) to receive our money and found the office locked," said Rasul Miah, a victim from Mir Hazirbagh.

Iqbal Hossain, the deputy commissioner (Demra Zone) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police said, "I am well concerned about the matter and have ordered the officer-in-charge (OC) of Demra Police Station to take proper initiatives."

But none of the fake organisation has been arrested yet, sources at Demra PS said.

Alhaj Robiul Islam, president of Mohammadpur Welfare Association, said, "NGO Affairs Bureau is the only authority to monitor and check the fake loan giving organisations. Why it does not take action against them?"

"To stop other fake savings and loan giving organisations' illegal activities, law

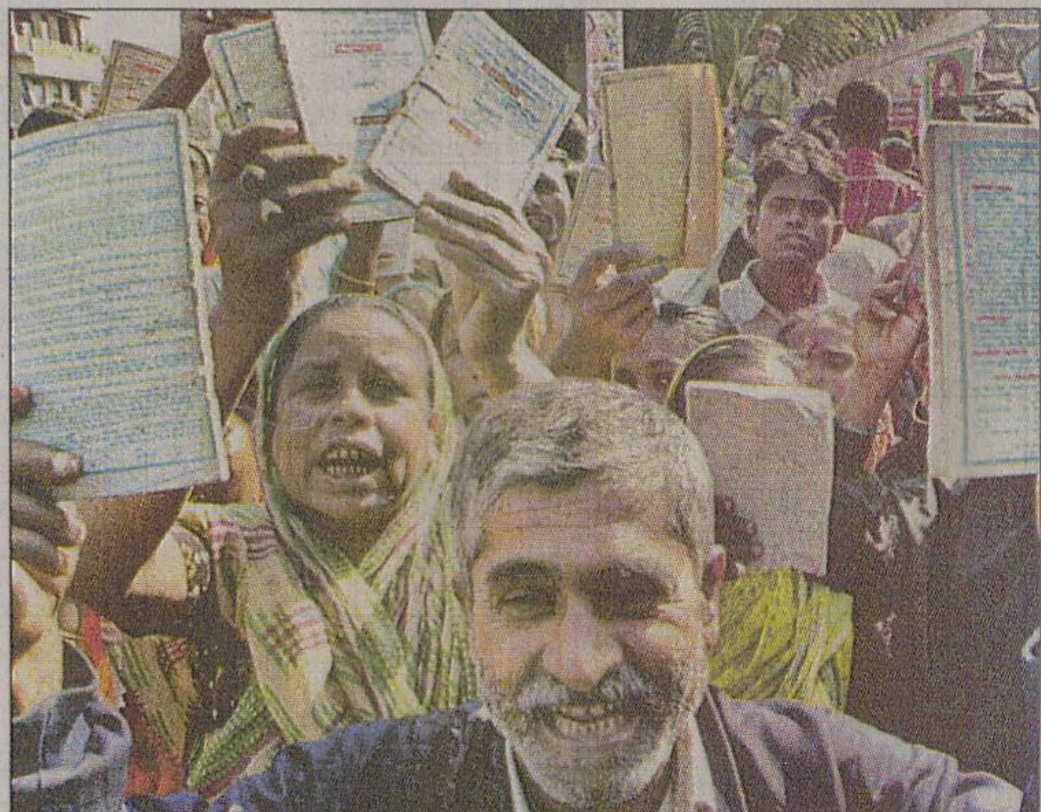
enforcement agencies should take stern and immediate action," said Serajul Islam, secretary of Baitul Wahab Jame Masjid in Mohammadpur.

When contacted, a high official of NGO Affairs Bureau requesting anonymity said, "Prospective depositors should justify the NGO's legality before depositing money, otherwise we are not responsible if anyone is deceived."

He added that they are trying to stop this illegal practice by regular monitoring.

DMP Commissioner SM Mizanur Rahman however expressed surprise hearing the names of these fake loan giving organisations as he never heard them before.

Asked if they have taken any precautionary step in other areas, he said, "If NGO Affairs Bureau informs us about these fake organisations, we will go for action."



Hundreds of angry depositors in Mir Hazirbagh of Demra came out on the streets on December 25 last year after finding out that they had been cheated by a fake savings and credit organisation.