

# POSITION STATEMENT

**DiABETES UK**  
CARE. CONNECT. CAMPAIGN.

Title	Date
Safe disposal of sharps used by people with diabetes	February 2015
<b>Key points</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many people with diabetes need to use sharps, such as needles to inject insulin and fingertip lancing devices, to treat and manage their condition. These should be disposed of in sharps containers.</li><li>• Sharps should never be disposed of in domestic waste or recycling. This is potentially hazardous to anyone who comes into contact with the waste, including refuse collectors and members of the public.</li><li>• Some people with diabetes may prefer not to leave sharps boxes outside their home due to concerns about confidentiality or safety.</li><li>• To encourage and enable responsible behaviour, sharps disposal should be as easy as possible and take into account the preferences of people with diabetes. Diabetes UK calls for every person with diabetes who uses sharps to have access to:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ sharps containers that are appropriate to their individual needs, which are available free of charge on prescription or from their local authority; and</li><li>○ a free sharps collection service, from their home, or agreed alternative location, provided by their local authority or another appropriate body; and/or</li><li>○ alternative means of disposing of sharps locally, which are convenient and free to use, and take account of individual circumstances and preferences; and</li><li>○ accurate and easy to locate information about local collection/disposal arrangements for sharps. This information should be available on every local authority website and via the 'request clinical waste collection' page on the GOV.UK website (1).</li></ul></li><li>• Local authorities, as waste collection authorities, have a duty to “arrange for the collection of household waste” in their area (2). For clinical waste, including sharps, this duty arises when a collection is requested by the person who controls the waste (such as a person with diabetes who treats themselves at home).</li><li>• Local authorities that choose not to provide a sharps collection service, should consider how else they can fulfil these obligations, and make arrangements with other service providers.</li></ul>	

- Although local authorities are permitted to charge for collecting clinical waste from domestic properties, it is good practice not to do so. This may be prohibitively expensive for many people with diabetes, and discourage them from using the service.
- Given local authorities' responsibilities, they should be the first port of call for anyone seeking information about sharps disposal. Their websites should inform residents about local collection services, and how these can be arranged. If a local authority does not provide the service itself, it should publicise other arrangements that are in place. Websites, and other sources of information, should be checked regularly to ensure they are up to date.
- Healthcare professionals who work with people with diabetes, and those who prescribe sharps boxes, should make themselves aware of local arrangements for sharps collection/disposal. They should inform patients about how to use sharps boxes, the availability of collection and disposal services and where to go for further assistance, as part of providing person centred care.

## Introduction

- Many people with diabetes need to use sharps, such as insulin syringe needles and fingertip lancing devices, to treat and manage their condition. These sharps need to be disposed of safely, to minimise the risk of accidental injury or cross-infection of infectious diseases.
- Containers for disposing of sharps are available on prescription and, in some places, are provided by local authorities. However, we understand people with diabetes sometimes find it difficult to obtain a sharps container that is appropriate for their needs, to dispose of sharps or sharps containers in their local area, and/or to find information about local collection/disposal services. In some cases, this can mean sharps are disposed of in household waste (3).
- Some people with diabetes may prefer not to leave sharps boxes outside their home due to concerns about confidentiality or safety.
- Most local authorities are waste collection authorities. Section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, states that it is the duty of each waste collection authority to "arrange for the collection of household waste in its area".
- For some types of waste, such as clinical waste, this duty arises when a collection is requested by "the person who controls the waste" (such as a person with diabetes who treats themselves at home). Schedule 1 of the Controlled Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2012 enables local authorities to charge for collecting clinical waste from domestic properties. The definition of clinical waste includes sharps.

- If a person treats themselves in their own home, any waste that is generated is considered to be their own and the above provisions should apply. However, if a patient is treated by a healthcare professional in their home, waste produced during that treatment is considered to be the healthcare professional's waste. They must remove and dispose of hazardous waste, such as sharps. Other waste can be disposed of with household rubbish (4).

### **Current situation**

- The provision of sharps collection/disposal services is inconsistent, and local arrangements vary (5). For example:
  - Some – but not all – local authorities provide sharps collection services from domestic properties, if requested. Local authorities are permitted to charge for this service, and a few appear to do so (6). Sharps containers may be supplied as part of this service.
  - In some areas, people with diabetes are able to return sharps boxes to GP practices, health centres, or local pharmacies, and/or these places run free collection services (7).
- While many local authorities provide information about sharps collections on their websites, our research indicates this is not always easy to find or kept up to date (7). Some websites contain no information about this matter. Similarly, there is a lack of consistent and accurate information about collection/disposal services provided by other bodies, such as health centres and pharmacies. This can make it difficult for people with diabetes – and their healthcare providers – to find out what arrangements apply in their local area.
- It is currently unclear how widespread the problem is for people with diabetes, but the Diabetes UK Careline has had an increasing number of calls about lack of access to free disposal of their sharps. Financial pressures on local authorities and the NHS appear to be affecting sharps collection/disposal arrangements – possibly resulting in fewer services and/or fees being charged. Given the rising number of people being treated with insulin, it is likely to become increasingly important for there to be accessible local services, and accurate information about those services.
- Following discussions about this matter between Diabetes UK and the Local Government Association, a briefing note on clinical waste was circulated to local authorities in January 2015. This reminds local authorities (as waste management authorities) about their responsibilities relating to sharps, and asks them to ensure their websites contain up to date information about local services. It also notes that:
  - If people with medical conditions treat themselves at home, any healthcare waste they produce is considered to be their own.

- Local authorities have a duty to collect and dispose of household waste, including healthcare waste, from domestic properties. They may charge for the collection of certain types of waste, such as clinical waste and sharps (5).

## **Diabetes UK recommendations**

### **For people with diabetes:**

- Sharps should never be disposed of in domestic waste or recycling. This is potentially hazardous to anyone who comes into contact with the waste.
- Sharps disposal should be made as easy as possible, to encourage and enable responsible behaviour. Every person with diabetes who uses sharps should have access to:
  - sharps containers that are appropriate to their individual needs, and are available free of charge (on prescription or from a local authority);
  - a free sharps collection service, from their home, or agreed alternative location, provided by their local authority or another appropriate body; and/or
  - alternative means of disposing of sharps locally, which are convenient and free to use, and take account of individual circumstances; and
  - accurate and easy to locate information about local collection/disposal arrangements for sharps. This information should be available on every local authority website and via the 'request clinical waste collection' page on the GOV.UK website.

### **For local authorities:**

- Local authorities that do not provide a sharps collection service, should consider how else they can fulfil their obligations relating to clinical waste collections in discussion with local health services. They should make arrangements with other service providers, to ensure everyone with diabetes who needs a home collection service is able to receive one.
- Although local authorities are permitted to charge for collecting clinical waste from domestic properties, we encourage them not to do so. This may be prohibitively expensive for many people with diabetes and may resort in inappropriate disposal practices being adopted.
- Local authorities – given their responsibilities as waste collection authorities – should be the first port of call for anyone seeking information about sharps disposal. Websites should inform residents about local collection services, and how these can be arranged. If a local authority does not provide the service itself, it should publicise other arrangements that are in place (such

as a list of healthcare providers that collect sharps). Websites, and other sources of information, should be checked regularly to ensure they are up to date.

#### **For healthcare professionals:**

- Healthcare professionals who work with people with diabetes, and those who prescribe sharps boxes, should make themselves aware of local arrangements for sharps collection/disposal. They should inform patients about how to use sharps boxes, the availability of collection and disposal services and where to go for further assistance, as part of providing person centred care.

#### **Notes and references**

- (1) This site enables people in England and Wales to type in their postcode and find services provided by their local authority. It is only useful if local authority websites contain relevant information.
- (2) Section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.
- (3) For example, in October 2014, Diabetes UK sent a short survey about sharps disposal to members of Diabetes Voices. Of 207 people who responded, 20 per cent said they had difficulties disposing of sharps and put them in household rubbish. The main reasons for doing so were lack of awareness of, and lack of availability of, other disposal options.
- (4) Based on guidance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on the GOV.UK website.
- (5) According to the sharps survey referred to in (iv) above, 28 per cent of people who responded said they disposed of sharps through a GP practice or health centre; 28 per cent used a sharps box collected by their local authority; and 14 per cent used a pharmacy.
- (6) Research carried out by Diabetes UK in July 2014 found that local authority practice in England varies considerably. We looked on the websites of 170 local authorities, and 105 said that they provide clinical waste collections. Of these, 96 said they provide (or appear to provide) a free service, and nine said they charge, or may charge, for this service. The remaining 63 local authorities either said that they do not provide a sharps collection service, or their websites contained no information about this matter. [It should be noted, though, that there are some reservations about the accuracy of this information. The Local Government Association has indicated that free collections are not provided as widely as this research suggests and some websites may be out of date.]
- (7) It is unclear how many health centres and pharmacies provide these services, and they are not required to do so. They may bear the costs of disposal, though some GP practices get their costs reimbursed from the NHS Area Team. According to the Local Government Association, sometimes local authorities arrange for health services to collect or accept sharps instead of providing their own service.