

# The Healthcare Industry Saves Lives while Killing the Planet

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Medical waste: the problem

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## Introduction

Over the last year, the coronavirus has opened our eyes to unforeseen truths. Although its negative effects are doubtlessly cruel, it has done some good for the environment. The sky is bluer, the air is fresher, and there are more animals in sight. However, the other side of that is a *staggering* 240 tons of medical waste being produced daily (The Verge, 2020). That is equal to the weight of three space shuttles. The industry is destroying our planet and COVID-19 is speeding up the process— exponentially.

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## The Topic

Medical waste has always been a global issue, but the ongoing pandemic has exacerbated its effect more than ever. Even in the small town of Oakville, Ontario, used masks fly by walkways and patients inundate local hospitals. The sky-high numbers of confirmed cases seem to indicate that the obstacle is never-ending. From vaccinations by health workers to the used masks of citizens, everybody is a contributor.

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Our local hospital, "Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital." Cars are constantly seen going in and out.

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## Threat to Biodiversity

All materials that contact bodily fluids are potentially contagious and must be dealt with specially. By polluting the fields, air, and water, poor disposal practices endanger biodiversity. The wildlife can be critically injured or even bleed to death at the hands of sharp blades. Meanwhile, contaminated matter causes birth defects, including hermaphroditism and abnormal brain structures. Organisms that undergo those deformities have shorter lifespans, causing some animal species to decrease as a consequence.

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## **Mask Pollution**

In 2020, more than 1.5 billion masks were dumped into oceans (CTV News, 2020). As the pandemic progresses, the number will only increase. Being made primarily of plastic, they will take centuries to decompose. The indigestible matter gets passed around the food chain and perpetually damages the ecosystem.

## **Incineration**

The most popular disposal method is incineration, which is to burn litter. During flammation, carbon dioxide, acidic, and other harmful materials are released into the air. Statistics show that this method creates 2.5 times more CO<sub>2</sub> than a coal power plant would when generating the same amount of electricity (Energy Justice Network, n.d.). In Canada, nature surrounds each street and corner. From our white winters to our red, yellow, and orange maple leaves, we are blessed with exhilarating scenery. However, with the increasing emissions, our future will be replaced with dull colours and stifling air.

## **Climate Change**

Throughout the incineration procedure, the climate is negatively affected by the harmful air emissions. The rising temperatures have their toll on all communities, including Oakville. The water levels rise every year, occasionally flooding parks or trails. In 2017, it caused temporary closures of two local parks: Bronte Fisherman's Wharf and Coronation Park.

## **Sustainable Development Goal**

Among the sustainable development goals, the fifteenth connects the most with our topic of research. The goal; life on land, is to "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss." (SDG, 2016). To achieve that locally, we

must reduce all pollution. Reducing medical waste would simultaneously affect community goals positively.

Many creatures, especially birds, are prone to mask suffocation. However, physical junk is not the only thing hurting life on land. With each new incineration site, ecosystems are abolished. Nearby organisms become exposed to pollutants, killing them or forcing them to relocate.

Incinerated materials are put into landfills but if they are poorly constructed, their chemicals can sink underground. Occasionally, animals even consume the ashes. That inflicts boundless health concerns, especially to squirrels and birds in Canada.

## Solutions

The root of most environmental problems is apathy. Due to underwhelming action as a society, too many people are ignorant of the severity of pollution. If communities educate their citizens, there will be fewer masks, wrappers, and bags floating outside our homes and schools.

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One of the various masks found littered on the streets during a walk.

Another way to reduce mask litter is by switching to reusable ones. They promote responsible consumption and less plastic in landfills. Not just masks, but buying eco-based (medical) products when possible helps advance the situation. To further reduce hospital waste, hand dryers are a better investment than paper towels. Generally, paper plates and utensils are cheaper and more eco-friendly than plastic. Those are some things to be considered in the healthcare field.

Autoclaving is a sterilization procedure that uses high pressure and steam to disinfect hazardous materials. The process allows trash to be disposed of safely. As a result, fewer pollutants are released. Although it still enters dumping grounds, its toxicity along with the dangers to habitats are lowered. It is a popular sanitization method that is significantly more eco-friendly. Similarly, air scrubbers are used in incineration devices to remove chemicals. Nevertheless, the biggest changes will be brought about when the government enforces stricter waste regulations.

## **What You Can Do**

There are countless ways that you can contribute to change. Numerous organizations that aim to decrease medical waste in landfills have donation sites, such as MedShare. It has already saved thousands of tons from going to misuse! You can also raise awareness like we are through this article. Whether it is making posters, speaking out, spreading information, or starting fundraisers, anyone can make an impact.

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## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 is producing six times more medical trash than usual. The problem is real and it is affecting the lands, waters, and air negatively. However, with each problem comes a remedy. There are still several paths we can take to tackle the issue. But it cannot be later. It must be now.

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