

Minister concerned about deadly toxins being railed east

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Paul Lampathakis

November 14, 2009 06:00pm

DANGEROUS clinical waste is being transported by rail from WA to Victoria for disposal - in breach of strict contract conditions to stop the spread of disease.

The medical waste, which includes ``sharps'', such as hypodermic needles, blades and other objects used to puncture or cut skin, is meant to be incinerated in WA.

Health Minister Kim Hames yesterday demanded an urgent briefing to determine the health risks.

The company involved is also using Victoria as the disposal point for hazardous WA cytotoxic waste -- pictured in purple containers on the right -- which is produced by chemotherapy and is known to be potentially carcinogenic and mutagenic.

Both types of waste are supposed to be destroyed in WA, a spokeswoman for Dr Hames said. She confirmed yesterday that a multi-department investigation had been launched because the company, SteriHealth, was supposed to be using a WA Government-approved facility to incinerate sharps.

The Sunday Times understands SteriHealth, which operates in Welshpool, has contracts to collect and dispose of waste for many health and clinical facilities in WA.

According to Health Department policy: ``Concentrated cultures of pathogens and contaminated sharps, particularly hypodermic needles ... are considered as a very hazardous waste class."

The spokeswoman said: ``The contract with SteriHealth requires sharps to be incinerated in a WA Government approved facility. The Department of Health confirmed in early November that SteriHealth had been transporting sharps to the eastern states and crushing them."

The Sunday Times has obtained emails which reveal the Government knew about the contract breaches as early as May and the company had been transporting the waste to Victoria for six months before then.

Dr Hames said yesterday he would request a briefing next week, because: ``I want to know if there are any health risks associated with the disposal of this waste."

The spokeswoman said the Department of Treasury and Finance had been urged this week to

enforce SteriHealth's "contractual requirements" about the sharps waste."

From Tuesday to Thursday last week, *The Sunday Times* observed and photographed waste being loaded into an unrefrigerated container at SteriHealth's yard.

On Thursday, the waste was driven to a Welshpool rail yard in a truck that did not have markings on it warning it was transporting clinical waste, contravening Environment Department regulations.

SteriHealth WA state manager Nathan Ahern yesterday denied the company was doing anything wrong.

"There is a situation where in consultation with the Health Department, we need to make sure that we comply with their request for destruction (of sharps), and those particular situations are being done," he said.

He also said the company was not doing anything wrong with the cytotoxic waste "because the waste is being incinerated when it arrives in Victoria".

Mr Ahern said the company sent the waste to its own facilities in Victoria because it was cheaper than incinerating it at WA's Welshpool incinerator.

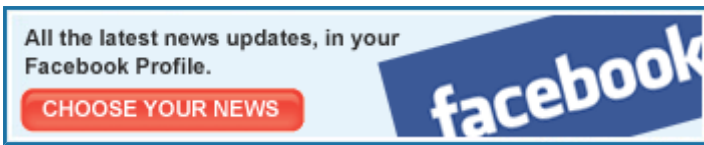
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