



DATE: May 11, 2009

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State's First Biohazardous Medical Waste Civil Penalty Costs Phoenix Veterinary Laboratory \$80,000

PHOENIX (May 11, 2009) – In the State of Arizona's first civil penalty for biohazardous medical waste violations, a Phoenix veterinary laboratory will pay \$80,000 in civil penalties for routinely throwing the improperly treated waste into a trash dumpster, ADEQ officials and Attorney General Terry Goddard announced today.

ADEQ inspectors, responding to a citizen complaint in October 2006, observed that workers from Reference Laboratories, Inc., 2320 W. Peoria Ave., were using a dumpster to dispose of glass microscope slides and cover slips that contained animal tissue specimens.

Under Arizona law, the slides and cover slips are classified as biohazardous "medical sharps," and must be stored in a container that is rigid, puncture-resistant, leakproof, and fitted with a locking cap. The facility used unlabeled duct-taped plastic-lined cardboard boxes to discard the slides and cover slips. It also stored the boxes on-site for about a week before discarding them.

In addition, medical sharps containers must be labeled with the universal biohazardous medical symbol and shipped off site using a biohazardous medical waste transporter that is registered with ADEQ. Biohazardous waste must be treated by a permitted biohazardous medical waste treatment facility. Approved treatment methods include incineration and autoclaving (which is sterilization by pressurized steam).

Facility employees told ADEQ inspectors that since the glass was treated with methyl alcohol, they believed it was safe to throw the material in a dumpster.

The employees told ADEQ that this had been the Delaware-based organization's practice since 1997, and was also the procedure followed by the company in other states.

ADEQ issued a Notice of Violation in January 2007, and the facility documented that it was complying with the law the following month.

"The facility carelessly endangered the health and safety of the community, the environment, and its own employees," said ADEQ Acting Director Patrick J. Cunningham. "To protect human beings and animals from the risk of exposure to potentially infectious microorganisms, Arizona requires that biohazardous medical waste be safely handled."

Reference Laboratories paid a penalty in California in 2006 for similar violations.