

# Intensive Care. Intensive Hazards?

Martha Merson

One of my best friends spent over 60 days in the ICU (intensive care unit) in 2010. Every day I am grateful to the medical staff who watched over her and the cleaning staff who prevented infections. At the same time that the hospital saved her life, it made other people sicker. This has to change.

## Health Care Creates Dangerous waste

Health care facilities dispose of more than four billion pounds of waste each year. For every patient every day, over a pound of trash goes into red bins for “regulated medical waste.” Some hospitals create four pounds of waste per patient per day.

Much of this is trucked away to incinerators. You can imagine the items being burned: gloves, IV bags, tubes, mattress covers. Many of these items contain chlorine, which forms dioxin when it burns. Dioxin causes cancer and many other health problems. Scientists believe there is no safe level of dioxin exposure. One gram of dioxin would be enough to poison 8.8 billion gallons of milk.

## Incinerators Make Residents Prisoners in Their Homes

Residents near the medical waste incinerator in Matthews, NC, where medical waste from 12 states is burned, have complained for years about



strong odors, fumes, falling ash, and other problems. For two decades Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League and its members have documented visible emissions, flames from the smoke stacks, and half-burned gauze and waste from the incinerator. They have appeared before county and town boards many times. Ten years ago, Geneva Johnson, who lived in Matthews and founded Prisoners Of Our Homes, said, “We shouldn’t have to live in a cloud of toxic fumes. It is time Mecklenburg County stopped protecting this polluting industry and protect the citizens.”

## A Solvable Problem

As I sat by my friend’s bedside in Boston, I hated to think of all the waste getting carted away from her hospital room to incinerators where it would burn and release toxins like dioxin, which would then harm other people’s health, possibly putting them in intensive care someday. It sounds bleak, but this is a solvable problem, and you could be part of the solution.

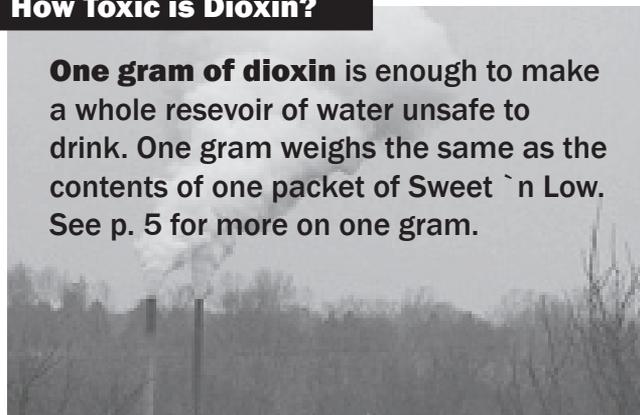
**As a citizen:** If you live in a state that incinerates medical waste, you could speak out. Tell decision-makers that no amount of dioxin is safe.

**As a worker:** If you work at a hospital or health care facility, ask the director to find ways to reduce waste. Hospitals can cut costs when they reduce waste.

**As a consumer of health care:** If you are a patient or a family member or friend of a patient, you could write a letter thanking the hospital for their care and asking them to take steps to prevent illness in other communities by reducing hospital waste.

## How Toxic is Dioxin?

**One gram of dioxin** is enough to make a whole reservoir of water unsafe to drink. One gram weighs the same as the contents of one packet of Sweet `n Low. See p. 5 for more on one gram.



Martha Merson is a researcher and educator at Statistics for Action. **Sources:** Cynthia Graber <[www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com)> 10-03-04; <[ejnet.org/dioxin](http://ejnet.org/dioxin)>; <[www.bredl.org](http://www.bredl.org)>.