

Medical devices – don't dump it, reuse it

The Austrian medical device market is valued at over €730 million per year with a positive growth trend.

Besides the growing medical demand, another reason is the ever increasing number of disposable single-use devices (SUD) which are dumped after use. SUDs are also responsible for the growing piles of hospital waste.

Every year Austrian hospitals produce more than 100 million kilograms of waste.

However this waste production is not unavoidable.

Historically, many items in the hospitals were and some still are reusable and were and can be cleaned, disinfected, sterilised – in other words **reprocessed** - and reused. Many disposable items that are labeled by the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) as single-use only can also be reprocessed between two and twelve times

In Austria reprocessing of single-use devices is illegal.

This is in contrast to other countries including Germany and the United States. There reprocessing of SUDs is legal under certain constraints for hospitals and third party reprocessors.

It is the manufacturer's decision whether a medical device is declared single-use or multiple-use. And there is no need to justify it. This decision directly affects whether reprocessing is allowed in Austria or not.

From a manufacturers point of view single-use labelling is clearly advantageous: larger volumes, higher margins, and no liabilities for reprocessing.

Reprocessing is safe. In order to cover up the obvious economic benefits, patients safety is often used as an excuse. Single-use is safe. Reprocessing is not. Of course there are sometimes cases where reprocessed devices do not perform to quality standards. But this applies for new and designated reusable items alike. **Clinical evidence supports that there is no increased risk for patient's safety using SUDs if validated cleaning, testing and sterilization procedures are carefully followed.**

Reprocessing helps the environment. In Austria the ban on reprocessing SUDs is in contradiction to the political objectives for sustainability.. Significant

ecological potentials to save resources, minimize waste and emissions are left idle. **On average the reuse of reprocessed SUDs saves 80% of waste, while the overall resource savings are significantly higher.**

Reprocessing saves money. **Reprocessing of SUDs could approximately save 60 to 100 million Euros in Austria.** However, until now this economic potential does not seem to be sufficient to establish a reprocessing system for SUDs.

Reprocessing is feasible. The experience in other countries such as Germany and the United States demonstrate the feasibility of a high quality reprocessing system that guarantees patients safety. This will help to improve existing systems for reprocessing of reusable devices, which are currently sometimes sub-optimal in healthcare facilities. **What is really missing is a clear commitment of the Austrian legislator and the executing authorities for reprocessing of SUDs.**

In the near future we will not see a uniform regulation on a European level. Thus a national approach is required if we are to quickly capitalize on the ecological and economic benefits. Most elements of an appropriate high level reprocessing system are well tried and tested in other contexts. **In Austria we have the chance to swiftly build a safe and high quality reprocessing system for appropriate medical devices.**

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