



The power of the waste sector throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

By Otto de Bont, CEO Renewi

The pandemic has tested the capacity of our whole sector rigorously. In the first four months of 2020, the global medical waste processing industry processed three to six times more materials than before.

On the back of the virulent spread of coronavirus across Europe, Governments acted rapidly to stop the spread of the deadly virus by closing down all but essential operations and putting citizens into lockdown.

Key sectors that were expected to continue operating included government, public health and social care, public safety, public services, waste, utilities and education/child-care and transport for key workers.

“It wasn’t necessarily apparent to the average person just how important a role our industry played in keeping Europe’s healthcare workers, social care workers and communities safe.”

Food outlets were permitted to open their doors, communications companies (including the media) continued to operate, and so did financial services.

As the general public watched the number of coronavirus cases climb, hospital admissions sky-rocket, and deaths in hospitals and care homes increase it became clear that while all sectors were seen as key, the people who worked in health and social care were well and truly on the front line, waging war on the virus.

‘Vital’

The waste management industry was one of the sectors that was considered vital, and while the services delivered were hugely appreciated in all territories in which Renewi operates, it wasn’t necessarily apparent to the average person just how important a role our industry played in keeping Europe’s healthcare workers, social care workers and communities safe by continuing to manage a growing mountain of hazardous medical waste.

Through the height of the pandemic, the European waste sector collected extraordinary volumes of surgical and medical waste from hospitals, and infectious waste from care homes.

In the first four months of 2020, the euro 10 billion global medical waste management industry processed three to six times more waste than has been handled before.

Europe and North America are considered

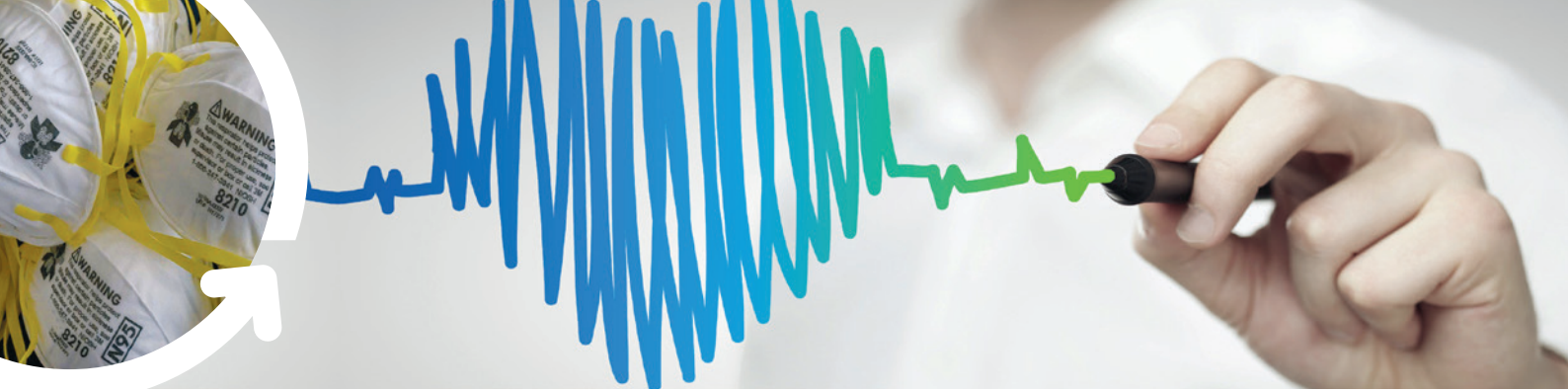
Capacity

The pandemic challenged the sector’s capacity. During the peak, the number of medical (closed) incinerators, autoclave and chemical treatment methods was inadequate to handle the high volume of infectious materials.

This left the waste management industry with no choice but to find alternative ways to manage waste contaminated with bodily fluids and other infectious materials, medical supplies and disposable PPE.

Depending on the country, the surplus of waste was handled in different ways. In the Netherlands non-medical incinerators were opened up to process waste under strict conditions, while our Southern European neighbours transported waste to other regions or neighbouring countries and looked to safely store waste in sealed containers.





“European countries’ ability to manage the challenge was influenced by policymaking and enforcement, collection capacity, transportation, management facilities, dominant waste treatment methods and existing excess capacity.”

Renewi was at the heart of this challenge, as we needed to provide a safe environment for our drivers to collect and transport this waste to existing or new outlets.

Renewi is a co-investor in one of the Netherlands’ largest medical incinerators, Zavin, which was able to increase its usual capacity significantly during the pandemic by working 24/7. During the crisis, Renewi also used its capability as a leading European recycler to find ways to recover some of the medical waste we collected for valuable reuse.

Collaboration

With global shortages of personal protective equipment – face masks, gowns – hampering efforts to keep healthcare and care home workers safe, we found a way to recycle face masks in the Netherlands.

We collaborated with Van Straten Medical /

GreenCycl to collect, fully sterilize and return up to 48,000 face masks per day.

Across Europe, countries are now moving out of lockdown. While no European government is under the illusion that the Pandemic has been eradicated, and the health sector remains focused on preparing for another peak, there is tentative optimism that for now, it is under control.

“In coming months and years, we expect Governments across the region to challenge the waste management industry to build additional capacity – medical incinerators and Autoclaves, to create greater scale ability in treatment and storage facilities.”



With the reduction in hospital admissions, the medical waste industry has seen a drop in the volume of waste being produced.

The industry working in those countries where there is no backlog has time to reflect on what measures need to be taken to mitigate against a similar experience if another peak occurs. Others, where waste was stored and now needs to be incinerated, will be focusing on this.

In coming months and years, we expect Governments across the region to challenge the waste management industry to build additional capacity – medical incinerators and Autoclaves, to create greater scale ability in treatment and storage facilities, including mobile medical waste treatment units and to look into introducing advanced technology solutions such as radio-frequency identification (RFID) to track waste materials and volumes and ensure safe management and disposal in the event of a crisis.

