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DOT Exempts Cultures and Stocks From Strict Packaging

by Gina Pugliese, RN, MS
Medical News Editor

The Department of Transportation (DOT) granted an emergency temporary exemption to the strict packaging requirements for cultures and stocks of infectious substances that were to go into effect on January 1, 1996, under the final Hazardous Materials (HM) 181G rule for infectious substances (formerly called etiologic agents). This emergency exemption expires on April 15, 1996, and was issued to Browning-Ferris Industries Medical Waste Systems (BFI) of Houston, Texas. Cultures and stocks will be allowed to be packaged as regulated medical waste according to provisions of 49 CFR 173.134 and 173.197.

In its request for an exemption, BFI cited the DOT packaging requirements as burdensome and estimated that the cost may be as high as $20,000 per month for one hospital to specially package their discarded cultures and stocks for transport offsite. This exemption also was granted to members of the Medical Waste Institute and persons represented by the American Clinical Laboratory Association.

In actual practice, nothing has changed. The exemption was effective December 22, 1995, and the DOT's final rule that expanded the definition of "infectious substances" to include cultures and stocks was not effective until January 1, 1996.

It is expected that all companies involved in transport of medical waste will file for a similar exemption. Medical waste experts say that DOT probably will take steps to expand this exemption beyond a temporary status.

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