

Joint Position Statement

ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE ACTIVITY IN THE HEALTH-CARE SECTOR

JOINT CNA AND CMA POSITION

The physical environment is an important determinant of health. Exposure to certain levels of contaminants in our air, water, food and soil can cause a variety of adverse health effects; these effects include cancer, birth defects, respiratory and cardiovascular illness and gastrointestinal ailments. Factors related to indoor air quality and the built environment including transportation systems can also significantly influence our physical and psychological well-being. Striving for a healthy environment in which there are no harmful effects resulting from environmental degradation is an important activity for health-care professionals and their professional organizations. Environmental responsibility must be practised at the individual level (in the workplace and in the home) and at the community level to achieve concrete results. Health-care professionals, through their interaction with individuals and communities, can lead by example in adopting environmentally responsible practices and advocating for public policies that support health and the environment.

PURPOSE

The health-care sector, which accounts for 10 per cent of Canada's economy,¹ is a significant user of energy, and it consumes considerable amounts of plastics, paper and other resources. The health-care sector is also a significant producer of solid, liquid and gaseous wastes, including such potent pollutants as dioxins (from the incineration of polyvinyl chloride [PVC]) and mercury. As an indirect result of these and similar activities, the health-care sector contributes to environmental degradation.

The purpose of this statement is to express the commitment of the undersigned organizations to increasing environmentally responsible activity within the health-care sector. The challenge is to minimize the health-care sector's burden on the environment by integrating environmentally responsible practices into the delivery of health care.

This statement offers a vision of a "green" health-care sector and identifies strategies that both individual practitioners and their professional organizations can use to help achieve this vision.

VISION OF A GREEN HEALTH-CARE SECTOR

In a green health-care sector, minimizing the impact of the sector on the environment would be a priority for individuals and organizations in day-to-day practice at all levels of decision-making within the health-care system.

¹ Canadian Institute of Health Information. (2007). *National health expenditure trends, 1975-2007*. Ottawa: Author.

Although there are convincing health and financial reasons for reducing the negative impact of activity in the health-care sector on the environment, there is also a compelling ethical reason for doing so. The health-care sector, above all others, should be conscious of the health impacts of its operations and should seek to be as environmentally responsible as possible.

As decision-makers, caregivers and role models for healthy behaviour, health-care professionals should encourage and implement measures to achieve environmental responsibility in the settings where they practise and in the health-care sector in general.

CHALLENGES TO THE GREEN VISION

Many challenges impede the achievement of this vision, including:

- failure to recognize the extent and urgency of the problem;
- low priority given to environmentally responsible practices among organizations;
- lack of awareness of available guidelines for environmentally responsible practice;
- lack of tools and structures to help guide the health-care sector in this area;
- high short-term cost of new green technologies and programs; and
- existing factors that encourage wasteful practice, such as:
 - increased diagnostic tests and paperwork related to fear of litigation, and
 - lifestyle choices and values that are difficult to change (e.g., the use of disposable products).

We believe these challenges must be addressed, and we will support and encourage activities that achieve environmentally responsible activity.

THE ROLE OF HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONALS

Individual Practitioners

Health-care professionals are in an excellent position to become spokespersons for environmental stewardship and can provide leadership in implementing the principles of reduce, reuse, recycle, recover and re-educate. They can encourage the health-care sector to adopt environmentally friendly policies and can adopt green measures in their own practice environments and personal lives.

There are many examples of environmentally friendly policies that can be used in the health-care sector.

- Waste can be reduced through:
 - exploring options to replace disposable products with reusable items;
 - ensuring that products that can be reused or recycled are kept out of the waste stream;
 - receiving electronic instead of paper journals; and
 - minimizing paper and other office waste (e.g., by working to halt delivery of junk mail).

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- Safe disposal practices can be employed for:
 - biomedical and infectious waste;
 - outdated medications; and
 - polyvinyl plastics, mercury and other toxic substances.
 - Energy use can be reduced by:
 - conducting an energy audit to identify potential areas of heat loss;
 - purchasing equipment certified by Energy Star; and
 - turning down the heat and air conditioning.
 - The use of toxic substances can be reduced by:
 - conducting an audit to identify sources of toxic substances such as PVC and mercury and marking them with a sticker to alert staff that they require special disposal;
 - identifying the least toxic alternative products; and
 - using non-toxic cleaning and sterilizing alternatives as well as the least toxic building materials, furniture and products for grounds maintenance.

Environmentally friendly policies in health-care facilities can be promoted through encouraging the establishment of strong and effective environmental improvement committees, or green teams, to:

- identify, promote and implement strategies for reducing the environmental footprint of the facility;
- provide in-house training in sound environmental practices;
- establish purchasing policies that emphasize environmentally preferable practices;
- encourage suppliers of health-care products to rationalize packaging practices;
- explore options to retrofit the facility to increase energy efficiency;
- identify combustion control strategies to improve the performance of existing incinerators;
- encourage staff and visitors to adopt active transportation by providing bike parking, or to use public transit where available; and
- support recycling processes throughout the facility.

In addition to environmental responsibility at the practice level, health-care professionals can serve as catalysts for change by becoming involved in activities in their community, such as:

- educating the public on environmental health, including the impact of environmental exposures on their health, adaptation to climate change, dealing with heat and days with poor air quality, and avoiding contaminants in air (both indoor and outdoor), water, food and consumer products;

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- working with partners to educate the public on protection of the environment through effective stewardship, including mitigation of climate change as well as reduction of waste and use of resources; and
 - ensuring that adequate environmental assessments are undertaken for proposed projects in their community and advocating for disclosure of known carcinogens and toxins used in the environment.

Professional and Regulatory Bodies

CNA and CMA can support and encourage environmentally responsible activities within the health-care sector, providing leadership in the following ways:

- We can share information related to:
 - supporting and encouraging educational initiatives for individual practitioners on environmentally responsible practices in a variety of health-care settings;
 - articulating best practices nationally and among professional groups;
 - modeling environmentally responsible behaviours;
 - encouraging research by health-care professionals and others on:
 - the environmental determinants of health (e.g., the health effects of environmental exposures), and
 - ways the health-care sector can move toward environmentally responsible practices (e.g., minimizing waste production and practising safe waste disposal);
 - supporting the efforts of all Canadians to find environmentally responsible ways to perform their daily activities;
 - encouraging health sciences schools to enhance their provision of educational programs on environmental health; and
 - fostering the development of continuing education modules on environmental health and environmental health practices.
- We can lobby individual legislators and governments regarding the need to:
 - incorporate concerns for human health into public policy initiatives dealing with the environment;
 - institute stricter environmental legislation (e.g., reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants);
 - initiate pricing policies that reflect the full environmental costs of goods and services; and
 - provide incentives to promote the use of more energy-efficient technologies and non-polluting energy sources.
- We can encourage international professional bodies and their members to lobby their governments to promote sustainable environments, which includes addressing the global problem of toxic waste disposal.
- We can advocate for health-care facilities to establish green teams and undertake other measures to reduce their environmental footprint.

CONCLUSION

Protection of the environment is a health issue. The public perceives health-care professionals to be highly credible sources of information on the impact of the environment on health.

The undersigned organizations view an environmentally responsible health-care sector as part of the bigger vision of a healthy environment in which people and societies choose to tread lightly on the earth in all their activities. We believe that health-care professionals should encourage greater environmental responsibility in all Canadians and should begin by setting the example of responsibility in their own personal and professional lives.

*Canadian Nurses Association
Canadian Medical Association
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Also see:

Related CNA publications:

Climate Change and Health [Position statement] (2009)

The Role of Nurses in Greening the Health System (2008)

Replaces:

Joint CNA/CMA Position Statement on Environmentally Responsible Activity in the Health Sector (2005)

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