

Greening your practice:

solutions for the medical office

by Stuart Foxman

To Dr. John Howard, a pediatric gastroenterologist at London Health Sciences Centre, and a professor at the University of Western Ontario's Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, recycling fits right in with diagnosing or prescribing.

Having a "green" medical practice isn't just environmentally responsible, says Dr. Howard, it's part of being a good doctor: "We need to focus on health, not just disease. The environment is about health."

Whether minimizing paper use, or arranging his desk to maximize daylight, Dr. Howard is mindful of the office's impact on the environment.

He calls medical work his "day job." His "night job" is chair of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE). The jobs are intertwined; as CAPE says, a green office is a healthy office.

Start with the office basics

Many greening solutions are common to any office setting:

- Purchase environmentally-preferable paper (e.g., containing high post-consumer content, and chlorine-free bleaching process), and use less of it by making double-sided copies, and recycling it where

possible for use as scrap paper.

- Look for third-party eco-labels (e.g., Green Seal, Forest Stewardship Council, EnergyStar) when purchasing supplies and office equipment.
- Keep recycling bins near areas where recyclable materials (e.g., paper, glass, plastic, and aluminum) are generated.
- Select products with the least packaging or most easily recyclable packaging.
- Use energy-efficient lighting.
- Reduce energy consumption by turning off the lights and equipment, and turning down the temperature, when the office isn't being used.
- Donate unwanted furniture to second-hand stores (e.g., Goodwill), and donate electronics to organizations that collect computer equipment, such as reBOOT Canada (www.rebootcanada.ca), or the Electronic Recycling Association (www.era.ca).

Greening solutions specifically for the medical office

Beyond these general ideas, physicians can be greener in areas related specifically to their practice. For example:

- With paper and packaging, be proactive by using electronic publications instead of printed versions where possible, or refusing unnecessary packaging from suppliers.
- Consider reusable equipment, such as specula, and cloth gowns or exam table covers. "Even with cleaning factored in, cloth is a better green choice than paper," says Gideon Forman, CAPE's Executive Director.
- Also replaceable are some chemicals, many quite toxic, used to sterilize equipment. "We can't neglect sterilization, but there are safer ways to go about it," says Forman, mentioning non-glutaraldehyde sterilizers or steam autoclaves.
- Phasing out equipment with mercury, like thermometers and blood



pressure cuffs, is another eco-friendly option. For disposal and other mercury information, visit Environment Canada at: www.ec.gc.ca/MERCURY/EN/index.cfm.

- The issue of discarding medical material, along with certain papers (e.g., patient records, where confidentiality must be protected), is a reminder that doctors have special considerations in managing office waste. It's important to adhere to professional and regulatory requirements regarding these areas of disposal, so check with prevailing legislation, and the policies of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (www.cpso.on.ca).

Environmental messaging is key

A green practice is about far more than the "3R" steps of reduce, reuse, and recycle. You can promote environmental responsibility by telling patients about your actions, or providing material — for example, literature or posters in the waiting room — to help them make similar changes in their homes or workplaces. You can obtain information to share from any group that advocates for the environment, like the David Suzuki Foundation (www.davidsuzuki.org), the World Wildlife Fund (www.wwf.ca), or CAPE (www.cape.ca).

Environmental messages are also a byproduct of talking to patients about healthy practices. If patients walk more, for instance, they drive less. "Being holistically healthy means talking about good nutrition, fitness and the environment," says Dr. Howard.

Greening your office is good for your environment, literally, and for the sake of eco-conscious staff and patients. Says Forman: "People want to feel that doctors have broader social and environmental concerns."

For hospitals or other health institutions, going greener — from energy use to waste management —

is part of being a better corporate citizen. In such settings, doctors can contribute by serving on environmental committees, which, according to Forman, often lack sufficient physician representation.

Dr. Howard says it's important to "walk the walk" too — or bike, in his case. Apart from his own green office practices, he cycles to work when possible, and drives a hybrid vehicle. "I usually try to park it beside the biggest car in parking lot," he says.

Taking green steps in a medical office is ultimately part of a larger environmental agenda in health care. Just before the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009, 12 Canadian health organizations, joined by the David Suzuki Foundation, produced a joint statement on the health sector's environmental commitment. One of the three calls to action is for health-care workers to "model and advocate for environ-

mentally responsible approaches to delivering health care."

Dr. Howard suspects that working green may not be on some physicians' radar as much as it should be. He suggests one possible reason: "It's easy to feel like, 'I'm a doctor, so I'm doing good all day' — that I've done my job, and now let the environmentalists do their job. But the environment is everybody's job." **OMR**

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