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Green energy could make every day a Clean Air Day

By Gideon Forman, on behalf of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE)

Send a letter to Canada's Environment Minister Peter Kent, urging him to take action on Clean Air Day.

Ontario doctors, nurses and leading health charities have teamed up to support renewable power and the speedy phase-out of coal-fired electricity. It's a project that's unique in this country.

Health professionals have long raised the alarm about air pollution because of the damage it causes to human health and well-being. In a landmark report titled *No Breathing Room*, the Canadian Medical Association calculated that in 2008 air pollution killed 21,000 Canadians and that by 2031 the projected "number of deaths due to long-term exposure to air pollution will be 710,000."

Now the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, the Ontario Lung Association and the Asthma Society of Canada are running ads in 15 Ontario newspapers under the heading, "Doctors and Nurses Support Green Energy." The ads — which are also appearing in magazines and on-line — tell readers that last year Ontario's coal plants caused more than 150,000 illnesses and over 300 deaths. They state: "Ontario doctors, nurses, and other health professionals support energy conservation combined with wind and solar power — to help us move away from coal." The logos of the signatory organizations feature prominently, representing literally tens of thousands of health professionals.

Coal-fired power begins with mining that devastates landscapes — in some cases literally removing the tops of mountains. Burning the fuel releases a host of poisons, including lead and mercury (neurotoxins), chromium and arsenic (carcinogens) and components of acid rain (sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides), in addition to the fine particles and smog-forming gases that take a toll on respiratory and cardiovascular health. Perhaps most worrying is its contribution to climate change: Ontario's coal facilities alone emit the greenhouse gas equivalent of several million automobiles. If global warming is the world's most pressing environmental problem and a threat to global health, banning coal is job number one. In an article published last spring in the *New York Times*, Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman noted, "James Hansen, the renowned climate scientist who deserves much of the credit for making global warming an issue in the first place, has argued forcefully that most of the climate-change problem comes down to just one thing, burning coal..."

But the new campaign in Ontario does more than just assess harm — as important as that is. This initiative, for the first time in Canada, sees health professionals combating air pollution by urging both an end to coal and an embrace of renewables.

Ontario has promised to close its coal-burning plants by 2014 but doctors and nurses want it to happen much sooner. They point out the province has more than enough coal-free power to close the plants right now. And they emphasize that coal is a disaster from start to finish. (Ontario is by no means the

only offender. In Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan over 50 per cent of electricity comes from this fossil fuel; in Alberta the figure is 82 per cent.)

This is why Ontario doctors, nurses and health charities have launched this unprecedented campaign for an accelerated coal phase-out and the development of renewable energy. Unlike coal plants, wind and solar operations do not contribute to brain damage and cancer, nor do they produce acid rain, climate change and smog. This is a good thing to remember the next time someone attacks green energy as "unsafe".

And it's a hopeful thought for Clean Air Day on June 8.

Gideon Forman is Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

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