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Health-care pros signal importance of keeping the environment healthy

By David Suzuki with Faisal Moola

You can't have healthy people without a healthy environment. We know that pollution and environmental degradation can cause a range of health problems, from mild stomach ailments to birth defects, cancer, and death. This creates strain on the health-care system and ends up costing us all.

According to some estimates, adverse environmental exposures in Canada are associated with up to 25,000 deaths, 194,000 hospitalizations, 1.8 million restricted activity days for asthma sufferers, and 24,000 new cases of cancer each year, with costs as high as \$9.1 billion a year. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that environmental risk factors play a role in more than 80 per cent of the diseases reported by the organization and that one quarter of all diseases and deaths — one third for children — are directly related to environmental causes.

The WHO also found that disease related to environmental factors is much higher overall in the developing world than in developed countries but that the per capita rate of some non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases and cancers, is higher in developed countries.

The health sector itself, which contributes about 10 per cent of Canada's gross domestic product and employs close to 1.7 million people, creates considerable waste and pollution and consumes a lot of energy. Recognizing the connection between healthy people and a healthy environment, leading health-professional organizations have joined together to call for an environmentally responsible health sector in Canada.

The Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Nurses' Association, Canadian Dental Association, Canadian Pharmacists' Association, and more, with help from the David Suzuki Foundation, recently voiced a commitment to make the sector greener and to get governments to consider the links between health and the environment when making policy decisions.

Beyond cleaning up its own act and trying to get the government to pay more attention to the environment, the sector hopes to set an example for others to follow. And, as health-care providers, they hope to encourage all Canadians to become more environmentally aware and thus healthier.

Leadership from this sector is much needed and welcomed. A recent poll shows that health professionals are among the most trusted community leaders. And we all rely at times on our health-care institutions and facilities. Many people in the health-care sector are also guided by a principle to "do no harm". One thing this suggests is that institutions devoted to healing should not be significant consumers of resources and sources of environmental harm through air and wastewater emissions, hazardous- and solid-waste generation, greenhouse

gas emissions, and toxic chemical usage. Thus, being green has a symbolic and practical significance for health-care institutions.

Greening their own operations is a great start for health-care institutions, but health professionals have been demonstrating environmental leadership in the wider community as well. For example, the Ontario College of Family Physicians and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario advocated for a recent ban on "cosmetic" or unnecessary lawn and garden pesticides in the province.

As we see so often when it comes to measures to protect the environment, it makes good economic sense to spend money on addressing environmental factors to prevent illness and disease, too. In some cases, those measures are fairly straightforward. Removing lead from gasoline has substantially reduced the incidence of mental retardation caused by lead exposure. And U.S. authorities have estimated that regulations introduced in 2005 requiring American power plants to reduce air pollution will provide between US\$85 billion and US\$100 billion in annual health benefits by 2015, an amount roughly equal to 25 times the cost of implementation.

Some issues are more complicated. Global warming is associated with a wide range of concerns related to health and the environment, from contaminated water supplies to food shortages.

The organizations supporting the greening of Canada's health sector recognize this, and are encouraging the use of energy-conserving techniques and products in health facilities, along with reducing waste through reusing and recycling and finding sources of materials that use less packaging.

We have many reasons to protect the environment. As health professionals have recognized, two big reasons are to protect our health and to save money. We can all follow their example by doing whatever we can to reduce our negative impact on the planet. After all, healthy environments lead to healthy people and healthy economies.

[Adverse environmental exposures](#)

[Health Professionals' Joint Statement](#)

[WHO Report](#)

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