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## Green healers

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A passionate group of activists is using their clout as physicians to impact environmental health

by KATHERINE ELPHICK • January 2011

Dr John Howard wasn't always an environmentalist. "I used to drive a big car and have a big house," the chair of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) readily admits. But going green changes things. He now drives a hybrid and rides his bicycle whenever possible. He still has the big house, but keeps the temperature low during the colder months. "I set it at 14°C, much to the chagrin of my wife, and it's super duper insulated."

The 57-year-old pediatric specialist based in London, Ontario, made the shift to an eco-conscious lifestyle and joined CAPE (*tel.* : [cape.ca](http://cape.ca)) because he's concerned about ecosystem health, human health and sustainable development.

CAPE is a group of over 4900 physicians and concerned citizens committed to a healthy and sustainable environment. As an organization, CAPE brings its health expertise to environmental issues and is an important voice for environmental health in Canada.

"Our mandate is to protect human health by protecting the planet," explains Howard, who believes that personal health is linked to physical, mental, social, political and ecological well-being. CAPE primarily focusses on select issues: pesticide bylaws, renewable energy and to some extent organic foods. "To be effective, you can't take on too much at once," explains Howard.

### GRASS-ROOTS IMPACT

The association was formed about 15 years ago by a handful of Canadian physicians interested in becoming eco-leaders. "We were very small in the beginning and growth was slow," admits CAPE's founding president Dr Warren Bell, age 64, who practices family medicine in Salmon Arm, BC. But a grant from the Trillium Foundation in 2004 changed everything. "That's when we were able to really start telling the world about what we were doing," explains Bell, a longtime activist. "It's also when CAPE started honing in on pesticide bylaws."

CAPE has led an extremely successful pesticide lobby across Canada in recent years. At present, lawn and garden pesticides are banned in Ontario, Quebec and in other communities across the country. Thanks to its track record, the association is fairly confident that, within the next five years, all of Canada will be free of pesticides used for cosmetic purposes. Scientific evidence links common household pesticides to a variety of serious illnesses, including cancer, reproductive problems and neurological diseases. For its work in pesticide education, CAPE has

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received several Canadian environmental awards. "CAPE was very involved at the ground level on pesticide bylaw legislation. It really helped to turn the tide on this issue," explains Bell.

## PAY IT FORWARD

Being an environmental advocate is important to Bell. "The state of the planet right now is somewhat insecure. The climate and pollution changes that are taking place because of our alteration of the earth's surface are becoming so obvious that even people who don't want to pay any attention to these issues are forced to do so," he explains.

That's why it's key for doctors to step up and become eco-leaders, says Bell.

By participating in organizations like CAPE, he believes doctors are extending their responsibilities. Says Bell: "Under standard conditions, physicians care for individual health, one patient at a time. But, in my opinion, in times like these we need to go beyond that and take an active role in protecting our community by protecting the larger environment."

Bell also cites his need to give back. He explains: "Financially speaking, being a physician has put me in a very privileged position because I get paid very reliably. I can't get fired or laid off unless I do something really stupid or criminal. I feel a sense of moral obligation to give back to the system that has supported me so well."

Judging by its successes and burgeoning membership, it appears that physicians make good environmental advocates. "The concept of doctors doing environmental protection just makes sense to people," explains CAPE's executive director Gideon Forman. He adds that membership has also grown due to the general uptick in public concern over environmental issues.

## THE SUZUKI EFFECT

CAPE has even teamed up with the **David Suzuki Foundation** ([davidsuzuki.org](http://davidsuzuki.org)) for "Docs Talk" a new blog on how the environment affects your health. The monthly blog features physician-penned articles on a variety of environmental health issues ranging from diet and pesticides to wind power or the Alberta tar sands. "It's a marvelous collaboration," says Forman. "Because it's written by credible physicians, it gets out solid scientific evidence on the issues. The reach is huge because it's hitched to the Suzuki Foundation."

Along with grappling with key environmental issues, CAPE also offers a meeting place for physicians to be both educated and supported on the green front. "It's a great forum for networking and sharing environmental interests," explains Forman. The association's website is also a valuable resource to anyone looking to make their hospital, office or home greener.

While CAPE can't campaign against every environmental evil, it does offer a lending hand to physicians doing green advocacy in their communities. For example, if a doctor is interested in protecting a forested area or a salmon stream in their hometown, CAPE might offer assistance by writing a letter to the local city council. "By signing letters we put our organization's weight behind it," Forman explains.

The planet-friendly association also supports an educational program called Organics for Kids, which teaches children the philosophy of organic farming. The program takes busloads of students to Plan B Organics, near Hamilton, Ontario. "It's a fun program where kids see organic farming first hand. They get to meet the farmers, pick vegetables and visit with the chickens," says Forman.

## SEEING RED ABOUT COAL

With pesticide bylaw successes under its belt, CAPE is now setting its sights on energy issues as an entry point into the climate change discussion. "We think that the number one job right now, certainly in Ontario and probably worldwide, is reducing and eventually eliminating the use of coal," explains Forman. As the most carbon-intensive fuel, coal is a huge contributor to climate change. "We can't do a whole lot about international coal use, but we can certainly do something about it in Canada," he adds.

After trying to phase out coal in Ontario, CAPE would then move on to removing coal in other places like Alberta and Nova Scotia. "It's such an important issue because, from every point of view, coal is a disaster," explains Forman. "And that's not just our opinion."

Why is coal so bad? It's a nonrenewable source of energy that releases large amounts of carbon dioxide into the air which leads to climate change. Coal also contributes to various environmental health problems. It's a source of sulfur dioxide which contributes to acid rain and it's a source of smog, which contributes to respiratory illnesses. The burning of coal also causes cancer by emitting carcinogens like arsenic and chromium.

## WHY WIND WINS

The association is also tackling nuclear energy. In a position paper authored by CAPE members Dr Cathy Vakil and Dr Linda Harvey, scientific data about nuclear energy lifecycle and its relation to human health is thoroughly reviewed. According to this research, health studies from Canada and around the globe show an increase in leukemia cases, lung cancer, thyroid cancer,

breast cancer and other serious illnesses, with both people who work in and live near nuclear facilities. With the CANDU reactors that use heavy water, Canada emits substantial quantities of tritium, but the use of nuclear energy continues, despite health risks.

"When you take into account the full lifecycle of the process — from uranium mining to waste disposal — nuclear energy contaminates our water, air and soil with cancer-causing chemicals and can have harmful effects on human health and our ecosystems," says Vakil, a 51-year-old family physician at Queen's University Family Medicine Centre.

The committed environmentalist, who has run as a Green Party candidate, also believes that nuclear energy is a hugely expensive way to create electricity. "Even when we talk about the amount of money we spend per megawatt, it never takes into account the environmental degradation and health care costs down the road," Vakil points out.

While CAPE is anti-nuclear and anti-coal, it's a big-time supporter of wind power. "It's probably one of the most environmentally friendly ways of creating electricity. Compared to fossil fuels and nuclear energy, the impact on both health and the environment is much less," Vakil explains.

Although anti-wind groups argue that wind turbines are bad for your health, CAPE isn't convinced. According to Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, there is no scientific data that proves wind turbine noise is harmful to health.

Looking to the future, CAPE plans to tackle health and environmental issues as they come up. And it welcomes more doctors and health care professionals to join their cause. "Right now we are a small mean fighting machine on health and environmental issues," says Howard. "With more members, CAPE could really become a big mean fighting machine."

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I hope to see more articles on CAPE's work.  
Great article.

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