

Search Go[HOME](#)[ARCHIVES](#)[AD INFO](#)[SUBSCRIPTIONS](#)[ABOUT US](#)[CONTACT US](#)

NATIONAL REVIEW of MEDICINE

BRITISH ISLAND, NEWSPAPER CANADA'S PHYSICIANS

MAY 15, 2004 | VOLUME 1 NO. 10

[Beyond On-Call](#)

CAPEd crusaders

Gutsy physician group takes on Mother Nature's foes. Tree-hugging for a healthier Canada

BY JULIA CYBORAN

Who has time these days to think about the environment? I mean we all do our bit by taking the recycling down to the curb, but between patients, paperwork and family, spending time crusading for a public cause usually sits low on the list. For most of us that is.

For some Canadian physicians the environment is a number one priority. Scattered across the country, the members of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) are working to better the health of Canadians by improving the environment ? even if they themselves find it hard to squeeze it into their schedule.

"I really don't have the time," says CAPE's outgoing executive director Dr Kapil Khatter. "I have to keep my practice quite small. But nature needs a lot of time."

We all have certain stereotypes when it comes to activist groups; environmentalists usually get pegged as granola-chomping compost zealots who opt for a mountain bike instead of a gas guzzling SUV. But this stereotype, like most, doesn't necessarily hold true. Environmentalists may walk among you, and go unnoticed.

It's perhaps going unnoticed that hurts CAPE the most. "We were always somewhat frustrated because we didn't have hoards of docs join," says Dr Peter Carter, one of the original members of CAPE. "However, when we were involved in a project I was always pleasantly surprised how much support came out." Dr Carter, who's on sabbatical from his Pender Island practice in BC, is no longer with the group but looks back at his days as one of the 'original six' with fond memories: "We realized there had to be a voice for the environment."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In November 1993, six physicians met in an Edmonton living room in what would be CAPE's first organizational meeting. "There were six or eight of us who started it," explains Dr Carter. "The main driving force behind it all was Tee Guidotti ? he has now moved to Washington ? and Warren Bell," remembers Dr Carter nostalgically. The beginnings of CAPE, like most other activist groups, were humble. "What we did early on was piggy-back our meetings on FP meetings and things like that."

It wouldn't be until September 1994 that CAPE would be officially recognized as a volunteer organization and become the Canadian affiliate of the International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE). Two years later CAPE started to get its feet wet. Their newsletter began being distributed on a semi-regular basis. They also began presenting their views at conferences and submitting reports on policy matters, with Dr Carter taking the lead. "One of the big issues was sustainable development and health issues," he says. "That brought us into regulation and risk analysis, which kept me quite busy."

Today, CAPE is going stronger than ever. With membership at 110, spirits are high. Nowadays the group has both physician and non-physician members. "We are now transitioning from a volunteer organization to a non-profit organization," explains Dr Khatter.

Despite the increase in membership, one of the group's biggest issues is still recognition in the physician community. Doctors rarely realize that their colleagues may be involved in activities outside medicine. "In the greater community we have a solid and credible reputation as a doctors' group," says Dr Khatter. "But in the medical community we suffer a huge lack of awareness."

A GROUP APART

One thing that sets CAPE apart from other environmentalist groups is their work to raise awareness of issues that impact human health, such as air pollution. "When CAPE started out people were only beginning to become aware of the increase of asthma in children," says Dr Carter, "we always thought that pollution might have an effect. That was 10 years ago. Today we know that's the case."

CAPE also looks at global warming and the health problems it may cause. "We try to sensitize people about the impending climate change and the potential disruptions and the problems it will cause due to heat waves and insects," says Dr Khatter. Due to CAPE's small size many of its activities are organized in conjunction with other groups. "We were part of the push for a pesticide bylaw in Toronto," says Dr Khatter. "We actively lobbied councillors. We're supporters of other community groups."



Another issue they're concerned with is the amount of pollution and waste humans produce and the unhealthy side effects it may have. "We don't entirely know the effects of the chemicals or substances that humans have created," says Dr Khatter. "There's a good chance that those substances can be linked to anxiety, ADHD, autism and reproductive abnormalities like low fertility."

They've also worked on environmental issues within the healthcare system. "We're trying to get mercury out of the system," says Dr Khatter. "We want mercury thermometers removed from hospitals and we want companies to stop the selling of mercury, especially to hospitals."

Even if the time commitment can at times be a little tough to manage, CAPE brings an incredible feeling of fulfillment to its members. "I got a tremendous amount of satisfaction out of it," says Dr Carter with gusto. "It's amazing what you can get done with collaboration and cooperation," says Dr Khatter, "You don't feel like these problems are insurmountable."

For more on CAPE visit: www.cape.ca

[previous page](#)



[BACK TO TOP OF PAGE](#)

