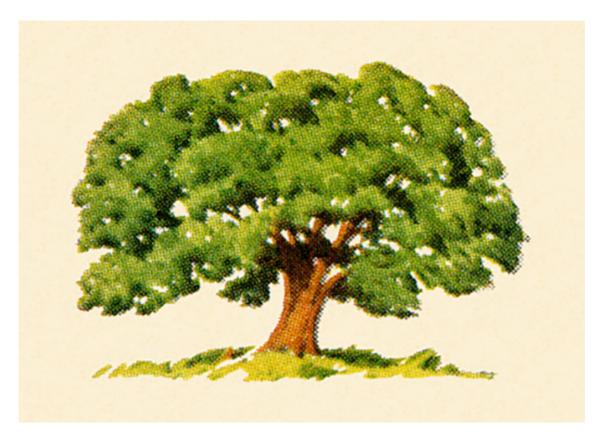# Canadian
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The greener clinic

Written by Abigail Cukier on February 26, 2020 for The Medical Post

Doctors have an important example to set protecting the health of the planet for the sake of Canadians—here are a few easy ways to get started

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As a new doctor in the early 2000s, Dr. Jean Zigby was troubled by reports regarding the depletion of natural resources and the increase in pollution. He started to look for like-minded physicians. At first, he felt quite alone.

"I felt it was irresponsible to continue as we were. I was trying to see whether anyone else was concerned in the medical community," said Dr. Zigby, who is a family physician and palliative care specialist in Montreal. "How can we go about putting Band-Aids on when everything is starting to deteriorate around us?"

Soon though, Dr. Zigby found other physicians who were already taking action on the issue. The Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) was founded in 1993 by three doctors who were frustrated that the health community was not addressing environmental issues—and their effects on health. Then in 2000, the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care formed to lead the integration of environmentally responsible practices into healthcare delivery.

After a pilot project showed that the community health clinic where he worked generated tonnes of waste, including much that was potentially reusable or recyclable, Dr. Zigby became founding president of Synergie Santé Environment, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping healthcare establishments in Quebec reduce their environmental impact.

"Physicians started asking themselves how they can help and how they can make this transition move faster," said Dr. Zigby. "More recently, there has been a massive shift toward energy efficiency in the healthcare system."

All this action is now ramping up in response to worrying statistics. A policy brief for Canada accompanying the November 2019 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change reported that Canadian healthcare has the third-highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions for the sector in the world, and healthcare accounts for about 4% of the country's total emissions. A 2018 PLOS study stated that in 2015, Canada's healthcare system was responsible for more than 200,000 tonnes of other pollutants, including ammonia, carbon monoxide, methanol and nitrogen oxides.

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Hospitals across Canada are making progress toward environmental sustainability. Dr. Zigby cited large projects, such as one at Saint-Jérôme Regional Hospital in Quebec, where they are beginning to sterilize large quantities of biomedical waste, grinding it up and making it safe to recycle—reducing waste and eliminating the pollution that occurred during incineration or transportation across large distances for waste management.

Haliburton Highlands Health in Haliburton, Ont., installed rooftop solar panels and geothermal heating and cooling in 2011, reducing its energy consumption to 50% below the average of similar facilities. The organization reduced energy consumption by 42% and greenhouse gas emissions by 800 tonnes, saving almost $200,000 a year on energy costs.

But Dr. Zigby said that to really create change, there needs to be system-wide policies. "The next big step is for the government to come out and say that healthcare is part of the problem and everyone has to do their part to reduce their environmental impact. Healthcare systems have been left to find local solutions. But if we want to make this transition fast enough to save the planet from climate catastrophe, we need to step up. Governments need to contribute finances from green funds for hospitals to transition."

Medical schools must also incorporate climate change and its effects on health into the curriculum, said Dr. Zigby. "There is a tidal wave of interest among young professionals who are meeting with policymakers and administrators and demanding the healthcare industry reduce its environmental impact," he said. "No one who has looked at the evidence is taking it lightly now. The solutions are around us. It's a question of getting political bodies on board so we can make the changes we need to make, because we really have no other choice."

Clinic-level solutions

While the most significant impact will come from large-scale policy changes, individual physicians can also contribute in smaller ways to improve the environmental outlook. Dr. Neil Arya, a family physician at the Centre for Family Medicine in Kitchener, Ont., said over the past couple of years more doctors are showing an interest in making changes in their own clinics.

Dr. Arya's family health team has a green committee that meets once a month. The practice offers an incentive to staff who commit to one year of not driving to work. Staff use direct deposits and e-billing, do laundry on the cold setting, and make a point of using reusable plates, cups and cutlery. The clinic's lights are on sensors, so they turn off when there is no activity in an area. "Small steps, like printing on both sides of the paper, turning off all computers at night, installing automatic water taps. I even make it a point to not put people on the exam table so I don't have to keep changing the paper all day," said Dr. Arya.

"These things are fairly easy to manage. If people think their part is too small to make a difference, we end up doing nothing. Each one of us may make a small contribution, but physicians, together, have the potential to make a much greater contribution."

This contribution becomes clearer when you consider the impact this has on patient attitudes. Doctors can discuss how climate change impacts health and talk about preventive strategies. You can display environmentally friendly tips in the clinic or share information on your website about environment-related health topics, such as active transportation and pharmaceutical disposal.

Dr. Arya said that while hospitals may have a greater environmental footprint, individual medical practices have a better chance of influencing patients. "We are among the most trusted of professions, so when we show people this is important to us and get patients thinking that way, we help them improve both personal health and their impact on the environment."

Being environmentally friendly can also be a recruitment tool to attract physicians to a practice, and measures such as reducing paper use or cutting electricity bills also save money and create a more efficient workplace.

"You can move over to products that consume less energy. Connect with organizations that buy back materials when you are done with them," said Dr. Zigby. "Look at how you can make money by selling your products, such as electronics or furniture, to an organization that will safely recycle or efficiently reuse them. You can help the environment while finding more efficient ways to practise."

Getting started

"Office management, especially green practices, aren't part of our educational culture in medicine," said Dr. Elaine Blau, a family physician in Tobermory, Ont. If you as a physician want to begin greening your practice consider the following checklist, picking off the easiest items first. "Celebrate the smaller successes before you decide to tackle more challenging items."

• Perform a waste audit, so you can track your progress. The [Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care](#) has resources to help, including a sample self-audit.

• Monitor energy and water use. [Energy Star Portfolio Manager](#) allows medical offices to benchmark their energy consumption to help make decisions to improve energy performance and save money.

• Find out about incentives from your utility company to offset audit and upgrade costs.

• Participate in clean energy programs, such as [Bullfrog Power](#), to support renewable energy development.

• Turn down the thermostat at night and on weekends and use energy-efficient lighting.

• Consider virtual visits where appropriate.

• Reduce or eliminate the use of bottled water.

• Switch to digital subscriptions of journals where possible.

• Autoclave reusable equipment where possible.

• Switch to compostable coffee pods or make drip coffee using a reusable filter system.

• Ask electronics or equipment suppliers about take-back programs or recycling of high-use parts, like ink cartridges.

• When renovating, ask your contractor for environmentally responsible upgrades, such as improved wall insulation, high-insulation windows and doors. Inquire about the recycling of demolition waste.

• Look for medical waste companies that use environmentally responsible alternatives to incineration or that recycle sterilized waste.

• Consult the [Green Office Toolkit](#) from the Canadian Coalition for Green Healthcare and the [Climate Change Toolkit](#) for Health Professionals from CAPE.