

Greening the Landscape

Minimizing environmental impact from Canada's healthcare system

By Kent Waddington



The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care traces its roots back to October 21, 2000, when two dozen representatives from some of Canada's largest health care associations and environmental groups met in Ottawa at a forum organized by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE).

Resulting from the day-long series of presentations on topics as diverse as energy efficiency, mercury reduction, PVC alternatives, dioxins, and pollution prevention, was agreement that a national coalition of the like-minded be formed. Twenty-two organizations provided their support for a national umbrella group that chose as its mission the minimization of environmental impacts resulting from Canada's healthcare system.

"Now that environmental sustainability is being embraced more than ever before by health care providers, the role of the coalition becomes even more important in ensuring that best practices are shared, success stories are told, and the bar is raised a little higher each time," said Edward Rubinstein, manager, Energy & Environment, University Health Network.

The coalition has had a significant impact on the greening of the Canadian healthcare landscape. Successes include mercury thermometer exchange events, a growing list of case studies, resource and discussion papers on topics such as local food, ENERGY STAR in the health care kitchen, climate change preparedness, energy reduction initiatives, the *Building Green Hospitals Checklist*, a Q&A Listserv and the free weekly electronic *Canadian Green Health Care Digest* sponsored by Philips Lighting Canada and the Canadian Healthcare Engineering Society.

The coalition is particularly proud of its 13-year relationship with the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) which has resulted in the annual Green Health Care Awards, Green Education Session and Canadian health care's first Green Lane, featuring environmentally-friendly goods and services, part of the OHA's annual HealthAchieve conference in Toronto each November. Green Lane has become a destination for those embracing environmentally-responsible health care delivery while seeking to deliver on their care commitment to patients.

The coalition has also garnered support from more than two dozen of Canadian health care's largest vendors. Many organizations committed to sound environmental action plans are now seeking credible eco-friendly vendors with which to deal. Suppliers are scrutinized by health facility purchasing departments and are being asked to submit details on such topics as the presence of an organizational environmental management system, whether the company has any pending notices of environmental violations, whether products contain lead or mercury, if post-consumer recycled materials are used in packaging and whether products are free of chemical changes under normal use that could be of concern (such as leaching of chemicals from the material). Some sites now are refusing to deal with vendors that do not meet a predetermined level of compliance.

Perhaps one of the coalition's most significant contributions has been to assist in the development of a *Joint Position Statement* – an unprecedented show of commitment and support for the adoption of sustainable health care practices by 12 national organizations representing all areas of the health sector and the David Suzuki Foundation. The statement spells out a commitment to creating an environmentally-responsible health services sector and calls upon health service workers to be models for and advocates of environmentally responsible approaches to delivering care; encourages health-care organizations to pledge to minimize the negative impact their activities have on the environment and encourages governments and policy-makers to respond by taking legislative and budgetary action.

Signatories also call on health facilities to adopt best practices that range from taking steps to save energy to the establishment of green teams that will promote waste reduction and the use of safer substitutes to reduce exposure to toxins.

A new local food project will also launch shortly. Funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the coalition will be working with a team of researchers and hospitals to develop a "growing your own food" initiative.

Kent Waddington is the communications director and co-founder of the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care.

• www.greenhealthcare.ca