

JOINT POSITION STATEMENT



Toward an Environmentally Responsible Canadian Health Sector

Context

Health, health care and the environment are linked inextricably. Environmental contaminants have been associated with compromised health status, including cancer, birth defects, respiratory and cardiovascular illness, gastrointestinal ailments and death — and an increased demand for a range of health care services.

The health sector is a significant part of Canada's economy, contributing approximately 10% of gross domestic product (GDP). Thus, the sector uses considerable energy; consumes large quantities of plastics, paper and other resources; and produces significant solid, liquid and gaseous waste. With the improvement of health care technologies and a growing awareness of environmentally responsible practices, there is an increased opportunity for reducing the health sector's environmental footprint. Although there are important health, financial and ethical reasons for adopting such practices in the health sector, a number of challenges exist, including financial, technical and administrative.

Vision

We envision the health sector as a leader in integrating environmentally responsible practices into the delivery of health care. We also see it as an advocate in sharing information on best practices and encouraging Canadians and Canadian organizations to limit their environmental footprint. In a green health sector, minimizing negative impact on the environment would be a priority for all organizations and individuals in their day-to-day practices and at all levels of decision-making.

A Collaborative Approach

Achieving our vision requires a collaborative approach to delivering environmentally responsible health care. For example:¹

- Greener health infrastructure:
 - Support investment in renewing physical plant infrastructure that allows for the retrofit of facilities that function more efficiently; use cleaner technologies; and meet new environmental standards for energy efficiency, water management and waste management.

¹ Canadian Nurses Association/Canadian Medical Association. *Joint position statement: environmentally responsible activity in the health-care sector*. Ottawa, 2009.

Association of Canadian
Academic Healthcare
Organizations

Canadian Association
of Physicians for the
Environment

Canadian Coalition for
Green Health Care

Canadian College of Health
Service Executives

Canadian Dental Association

Canadian Healthcare
Association

Canadian Healthcare
Engineering Society

Canadian Medical Association

Canadian Nurses Association

Canadian Pharmacists
Association

Canadian Public Health
Association

David Suzuki Foundation

National Specialty Society
for Community Medicine

Developed by a working
group of the above
organizations

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- Best practices:

- Educate staff and the public on the link between health and the environment and on the health impact of environmental degradation, and help in the development, dissemination and implementation of knowledge and best practices.
- Support and encourage research on health and the environment, and on environmentally responsible practices in a variety of health care settings.
- Implement energy-conserving techniques and products.
- Request rationalized packaging and other environmentally responsible actions from vendors of health care products.
- Promote safer substitutes to reduce exposure to toxic substances.
- Reduce waste by reusing and recycling when possible.
- Practise safe disposal practices for biomedical and infectious waste; outdated medications; and polyvinyl plastics, mercury and other toxic substances.
- Establish green teams to support the practice of ecologic stewardship.

We recognize that our efforts to achieve a greener health sector must fit into broader societal and global actions to improve the environment. The health sector plays a role in supporting the efforts of all Canadians to find environmentally responsible ways to perform their daily activities by contributing to the management of global environmental issues, such as greenhouse gas emissions and toxic waste disposal.

Calls to Action

We call on *governments and policy-makers* at all levels to understand and address links between health and the environment and to incorporate these links into policy decisions through legislative and budgetary actions.

We call on all *health care organizations* to pledge to minimize the negative impact of their activity on the environment and to seek solutions to existing barriers.

We call on *individuals* working in the health sector to both model and advocate for environmentally responsible approaches to delivering health care without compromising patient safety and care.