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Wonca: A (greener) world of family doctors

The report by Doctors Harvey and Ballard (page 280 in this journal) highlights the importance of environmental awareness, and action, by family doctors and our organizations. Environmental degradation has an important impact on health and it is part of the family doctor's job to be aware of and advocate for a healthier environment. Family doctors can do a lot to promote a healthier planet in the ways we practice, our personal habits (walking or biking to work), the facilities we occupy, and, perhaps most importantly, through the influence we have on our patients and local communities.

The international burden of disease from environmental factors is significant, and preventable. WHO estimates that the proportion of the burden of illness attributable to environmental factors is 24% of DALYs¹, 23% of all deaths, and 36% of deaths in children aged 0–14 years [1]. Environmental factors include chemical and biological pollution in air, water, and soil; ultraviolet and ionizing radiation; noise; the effect of the built environment; and climate and ecosystem change. These issues present at both the personal and public health level. The family doctor has an important role to play at both levels, along with public health experts.

In our practices, we see the effects of lead exposure on children. We witness the aggravation of asthma, chronic lung disease, or cardiovascular disease by air pollution. Yet, it is at the community and global levels where we face the greatest challenges. Doctor Margaret Chan, WHO Secretary General, described climate change as the defining public health issue for the 21st century [2]. Family doctors can be an important part of changing public attitudes. A Canadian survey found that people consider physicians, especially family doctors, as the most credible source of information on environment and health [3].

Our organizations can make a difference as well. Wonca World is concerned about and committed to sustainable development. We conduct the vast majority of our work by electronic communication, traveling only when necessary. Another example of our commit-

ment includes the establishment of a Special Interest Group (SIG) on the Environment, which is developing projects and education programs on climate change, helping family doctors create greener practices, and addressing children's environmental health.

There are a growing number of educational sessions on environmental health at Wonca regional and world conferences. For example, in Cancun during the recent World Conference, there were sessions on climate change, ecosystem health, health promotion towards sustainability, and taking an exposure history when assessing environmental health. We will present a session on climate change and the role of the physician at the upcoming World Medical Association General Assembly meeting in Vancouver. The Wonca SIG on the Environment is conducting a survey of family doctor attitudes toward climate change. It is also collecting resources for family physicians, such as Green Office guides [4] and a report on the effects of climate change on health and the role of the family doctor [5].

At the Cancun meeting, the Wonca World Council created a World Conference Committee, which aims to reduce the environmental impact of meetings, among its many other agenda items. We encourage family doctors to get involved and help make ours a healthier planet. Walk to work, recycle, occupy green premises, leave the smallest possible carbon footprint, lobby for change. Join with other family doctors and get involved through the Wonca SIG on the Environment.

References

- 1 Pruss-Ustun A, Corvalan C. How much disease burden can be prevented by environmental interventions. *Epidemiology*. 2007;18:167–78.
- 2 Chan M. WHO: Climate change and health: preparing for unprecedented challenges. Available at: http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2007/20071211_maryland/en/index.html.
- 3 Health Canada. An investigation of the attitudes of Canadians on issues related to health and the environment. Ottawa: Decima Research, 1992.
- 4 http://www.acfonline.org.au:80/uploads/res/res_greenclinicguide.pdf.
- 5 Ontario College of Family Physicians. Addressing the health effects of climate change: family physicians are key. 2008. Available at: <http://www.ocfp.on.ca/English/OCFP/Communications/Publications/default.asp?s=1#EnvironmentHealth>.

¹ Disability-adjusted life years.