

ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE HEALTH CARE SETTING

A NEW CLIMATE OF ACTION

By Cindy Russell, MD
Chair, SCCMA Environmental Health Committee

The question has finally changed from “Is global warming real?” to “What can we do about global warming?” Our culture is at the same time shifting from a culture of living “for the moment” to a culture that is thinking about the next generation and the problems they have already inherited. In every aspect of our lives, from recycling to the food we buy and the products we purchase, sustainability and “life cycle” are now questioned. Will our garbage continue to be toxic landfill in the future? How can we prevent pharmaceuticals and personal care products from entering the water we drink? Why is there mercury in high fructose corn syrup and plastics in our infant formula? We will be gone, but what about our kids? Asking questions and then beginning to answer them is real progress. Hooray! We are all, as individuals and institutions, part of the solution. Changing habits is essential.

Health Care Consumes \$5.3 Billion in Energy Per Year

Global warming is, of course, our largest and most urgent concern.

Many of you and our Environmental Health Committee at the SCCMA are also now asking, “What can we do as a community of private practitioners, hospitals, medical groups, and HMOs to reduce energy consumption and climate change?” As it turns out, there is a lot. Many health care facilities occupy aging, energy inefficient buildings. Health care spends \$5.3 billion on energy every year (www.eere.energy.gov/buildings/info/health/). Health care facilities also consume a large amount of other resources,

which means energy consumption as well. One medical center in the San Francisco Bay Area generates six tons of waste per day. Health care is responsible for one-seventh of the U.S. economy, thus reducing emissions from the health care sector is of national importance. The Environmental Health Committee has decided to focus attention on what we all can do to mitigate global climate change in our own county.

A Greening Checklist

Health Care Without Harm, an international coalition in the health care sector, has created a wonderful survey to address the state of “Greening” of health care facilities. As one goes through this checklist, it becomes obvious that some things have been done, but there is still a lot of opportunity to take more action. This is a useful tool along with the other resources of Health Care Without Harm and Practice Greenhealth. Hospitals in the county will be asked to take this survey. It is interesting that many of these changes have been instituted already by several large Silicon Valley businesses. Health care institutions are a bit behind the curve, but want to change that, and many are already actively working on these issues. We hope that both large institutions and private practitioners will want to participate.

Areas to address include:

Transportation

- Help commuters reduce emissions with carpooling/carshare/bike racks.
- Reorganize hospital fleets, ambulances, shuttle vans with hybrid/high fuel efficiency vehicles.
- Choose local suppliers to reduce transportation costs.
- Institute purchasing preference for less packaging and energy efficient modes

Dr. Cindy Russell has served as chairperson of the Environmental Health Committee since 1987 and is also currently serving on the Executive Committee as Vice President, Community Health.



of transport (many large businesses in Silicon Valley are already doing this).

Energy-Operations

- Dedicate personnel to energy conservation.
- Install occupancy sensor switches.
- Upgrade equipment.
- Reduce “standby” energy use.
- Buy green power.

Waste

- Recycle and buy recycled products.
- Collect and recycle nitrous oxide gases.
- Dispose of waste locally.
- Prevent waste by eliminating packaging and using compostables.
- Divert and reuse construction waste.

Food Service

- Reduce amount of meat protein on the menus.
- Buy local and seasonal foods.
- Buy organic food when possible.
- Compost food waste.
- Switch to reusable items for patients, staff, and visitors.
- Eliminate bottled water.

For more information, you can visit www.noharm.org, and Practice Greenhealth at www.practicegreenhealth.org.

