

# Joint Position Statement

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## JOINT CNA/CMA POSITION STATEMENT ON ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE ACTIVITY IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

**The purpose of this statement is to express the commitment of both the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) and the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) to increasing environmentally responsible activity within the health sector, thus helping to reduce the impact of environmental degradation on health, and preserving our ecological assets for current and future generations.**

A healthy environment is fundamental to life, and attention to the effect of the environment on human health is imperative if we are to attain the goal of health for all. To achieve concrete results, environmental responsibility must be practiced at the individual level, in the workplace and in the home.

Economic activity in the health sector makes up close to 10 per cent of Canada's gross national product; as such the health sector's impact on the environment is great. The express purpose of health care is to increase the well-being of citizens. The health sector, however, contributes significantly to environmental degradation through the high use of energy and disposable items, and through technology such as sterilization equipment that contributes to the depletion of the ozone layer by releasing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) into the atmosphere. The challenge is to minimize this burden on the environment by integrating environmentally responsible practices into the delivery of health care.

This statement offers a vision of a "green" health sector and identifies strategies that both individual nurses and physicians, and their associations can use to help them achieve this vision.

### VISION OF "GREEN" HEALTH SECTOR

In a "green" health sector, minimizing the impact on the environment would be a priority for individuals and organizations within the health care system in their day-to-day practice at all levels of decision-making.

While there are both health and financial reasons for reducing the negative impact of health sector activity on the environment, the most telling argument is ethical. The health sector, above all others, should be conscious of the health impacts of its operations and should seek to be as environmentally responsible as possible.

As decision-makers, caregivers and role models for healthy behaviour, nurses and physicians should encourage and implement measures to achieve environmental responsibility in the settings where they practice, and the health care system in general.

### CHALLENGES TO THE "GREEN VISION"

Many challenges impede the achievement of this vision, including:

- failure to recognize the extent and urgency of the problem;
- low priority given to environmentally responsible practices among organizations;

- lack of awareness of available guidelines for environmentally responsible practice;
- lack of tools and structures to help guide the health sector in this area;
- high, short-term cost of new “green” technologies and programs; and,
- existing factors that encourage wasteful practice, for example:
  1. increased diagnostic tests and paperwork related to fear of litigation, and,
  2. lifestyles and values that are difficult to change (for example, the convenience of disposable products).

CNA and CMA believe these challenges must be addressed, and will support and encourage activities that achieve environmentally responsible activity.

## **THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS**

### *Individual Practitioners*

Physicians, nurses and other health professionals are in an excellent position to provide leadership in implementing the principles of reduce, reuse, recycle, recover and re-educate. In individual practice this could involve:

- minimizing paper and other office waste, for example, working to halt delivery of “junk mail” and to rationalize packaging practices of suppliers;
- avoiding indiscriminate use of disposable equipment;
- using energy as efficiently as possible;
- recycling plastic containers and other recyclable material;
- observing safe disposal practices for:
  1. biomedical waste,
  2. plastic and nonrecyclable general waste,
  3. outdated medication, and,
- encouraging health facilities to adopt environmentally-friendly organizational policies including:
  1. establishing strong and effective environmental improvement committees,
  2. in-house training in sound environmental practices,
  3. purchasing policies that emphasize safety and environmental soundness,
  4. creating a safe working environment, and,
  5. taking a lead role in implementing these policies where they exist.

In addition to environmental responsibility at the practice level, health professionals should serve as catalysts for change by becoming involved in activities in the community, such as advocating that decision-makers review the environmental impact of a proposed project before approving it.

### *Professional Associations*

CNA and CMA believe that environmentally responsible activities within the health sector should be supported and encouraged. Associations could provide leadership in the following ways:

- information sharing:
  1. supporting and encouraging educational initiatives for individual practitioners on environmentally responsible practices in a variety of health care settings,

2. sharing information on successful practices nationally and among professional groups,
  3. encouraging research by health professionals and others on:
    - a) the environmental determinants of health, e.g. health effects of contaminants, and
    - b) ways the health sector can move towards environmentally responsible practices, e.g. minimizing waste production and practising safe waste disposal, and,
  4. supporting the efforts of all Canadians to find environmentally responsible ways to perform their daily activities;
- lobbying individual legislators and governments regarding the need to:
    1. initiate stricter legislation, e.g. reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and ban all use of CFCs before the end of this century,
    2. initiate pricing policies that reflect the full environmental costs of goods and services, and,
    3. provide incentives to promote the use of more energy efficient technologies and non-polluting energy sources; and,
  - encouraging international professional bodies and their members to lobby their governments to promote sustainable environments, e.g. address the problem of toxic waste disposal in the Third World.

## **CONCLUSION**

Protection of the environment is a health issue. The public perceives health professionals to be highly credible sources of information on health and the environment. The Canadian Nurses Association and the Canadian Medical Association view a “green” health sector as part of the bigger vision of a healthy environment in which people and societies choose to “tread lightly on the earth” in all their activities. We believe that health professionals should encourage greater environmental responsibility in all Canadians, and begin by setting the example of responsibility in their own personal and professional lives.

*June 2005*

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## SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

### DEFINITIONS

#### *Health*

We accept the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health that goes beyond the absence of disease to include total state of well-being. WHO defines health as “a complete state of physical, mental and emotional well-being.”<sup>1</sup> Health is affected by the state of the environment, which reflects economic realities and practices of governments and nations.

#### *Environment*

For the purposes of this document, the concept of environment includes such factors as clean air and water, and a sustainable population. It is understood to include the social, economic, and physical environment.

### SELECTED CNA INITIATIVES RELATED TO THE ENVIRONMENT

- CNA's in-house protocol to reuse and recycle was initiated in 1990; and,
- CNA Position Statement: Nurses and the Environment (May 1990):
  1. a healthy environment is essential to life. Individuals as well as the collectivity must accept responsibility in this regard,
  2. an environment that fosters physical and psychological health offers freedom from violence and discrimination with the right to autonomy and self-determination,
  3. CNA supports the principles of reuse, recycle and recover, and,
  4. CNA members are encouraged to act proactively by increasing awareness of others regarding environmental concerns and by acting as catalysts for change.

#### *CNA Resolutions*

On the use of chemicals and pesticides and radio-active material

**RESOLVED**, that the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) collaborate with the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to urge our provincial and federal governments and peoples around the world, to decrease and eliminate the use of chemicals and pesticides that contain contaminants, surfactants and solvents that are chronic carcinogens; that we encourage governments to put human health before all else, resisting pollution and import of products contaminated with banned pesticides, chemicals, or carcinogenic metals or metallic compounds; and that we work together to oppose any proliferation of radio-active materials into the environment; and,

**RESOLVED**, that the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) encourage studies, analysis and research on the role of chemical contaminants in altering immune system competence, and that we encourage epidemiological studies on mothers and children, to determine the effect of present contaminant loads on their children (June 1990).

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1 World Health Organization. Primary Health Care: Report of the International conference on Primary Health Care. Alma Ata, USSR, Geneva: WHO, 1978

On disposable items

**RESOLVED**, that individual members of CNA be urged to contact health care agencies asking them to examine their current and future use of disposable items, and determine appropriate alternatives to their use in order to reduce hazards to the environment from waste (June 1990).

On chemicals and pesticides

**RESOLVED** that CNA contact MRC, NHRDP and NRC to encourage studies, analysis and research on the role of contaminants in altering immune system competence, as well as to encourage epidemiological studies on mothers and children, to determine the effect of presents contaminant load on children; and that a resolution on this issue be submitted to ICN in 1993 (November 1990).

On chemicals pesticides and contaminants (International Council of Nurses)

**Whereas** people the world over are increasingly concerned about threats to the environment and are demanding that these be addressed by their governments;

**Whereas** there is increasing evidence that the extensive use of chemicals and pesticides has a negative effect on our environment and our health;

**Whereas** there is evidence that certain substances such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are concentrated in mothers' milk, and that some chemicals and pesticides are chronic carcinogens;

**Whereas** one hundred (100) nations committed to ratify the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action following the United Nations World Summit for Children (September 1990);

**Whereas** the Plan of Action addressed the need to preserve and create healthy environments for children;

**Whereas** findings of research into the effects of chemicals and pesticides on immune system competence would give guidance regarding necessary actions to protect children from the effects of these substances;

**Therefore Be It Resolved** that the International Council of Nurses and its member associations call on all governments to support research on the role of chemical contaminants in altering immune system competence; and epidemiological studies on mothers and children to determine the effects of present contaminant loads on children.

Accepted by the International Council of Nurses Council of National Representatives, Madrid, Spain, June 1993.

On sustainable environments

**RESOLVED**, that the CNA Special Committee on Clinical Practice Issues explore the interest of the CMA Council on Health Care and Promotion in a lobby of the federal government:

- to initiate stricter legislation, which results in a reduction of national carbon dioxide emissions, and a ban on all uses of (chlorofluorocarbons) CFCs by the end of this century; and,
- to actively encourage:
  1. pricing policies, which reflect the full environmental costs of goods and services,
  2. incentives to promote the use of more energy efficient technologies and non-polluting energy sources, and
  3. developed and developing countries to promote sustainable environments (March 1991).

## **CMA MATERIAL RELATED TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

*Health, the Environment, and Sustainable Development: The Role of the Medical Profession* (Policy paper, August 1991)

Recommendations include the following:

- that the CMA work with other medical organizations, the Canadian Hospital Association, Canadian Nurses Association, Canadian Public Health Association and other relevant organizations within the health sector, to ensure that the health sector is environmentally responsible;
- that the CMA, in conjunction with Health and Welfare Canada and/or other partner organizations, organize a national symposium to mobilize the health sector to minimize its harmful impact on the environment; and,
- that the CMA assist individual physicians in developing environmental responsibility, through supportive policy and the provision of updated information.

*CMA Resolution GC 90-108*

That the CMA:

- take an active role with the Canadian Standards Association in the development of a code of practice for the management of biomedical wastes in Canada;
- work toward the expression of this code in the accreditation process of the Canadian Council on Health Facilities Accreditation;
- work in conjunction with the Department of National Health and Welfare, Environment Canada and our provincial and territorial divisions to develop specific guidelines and a supportive educational process for the handling of all wastes in physicians' offices in Canada;
- encourage the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the College of Family Physicians of Canada to address the issues concerning biomedical wastes in their educational programs; and,
- encourage physicians to take an active role in the public discussion of environmental issues.