

# INTEGRATED ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CLINICS: HEALTHCARE FOR PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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One of the central questions we face in the 21st Century is how we can promote human health and wellness in an ever degrading environment? Pure water, clean air, and a non-toxic environment are rapidly becoming precious commodities. As healthcare professionals, we serve on the front line of this looming crisis. What can we do in the face of the ecological damage humans are inflicting on the earth? One small but vital step is the creation of integrated environmental health clinics. These clinics offer healthcare practices that integrate health and wellness for people with social and global environmental concerns.

Creating an integrated environmental health clinic requires three steps, each of which will be explored in this article. The first step is to green the built environment. This step requires converting existing professional office spaces into sustainable, green health facilities. The second step is to become an environmental health advocate. This involves healthcare practitioners learning to recognize and advocate for human and environmental health. The third step is to practice ecologically sustainable medicine (ESM). ESM provides cleaner, nonpolluting medicinal alternatives by including in care decisions, the upstream and downstream consequences of medical practices, and shifting to more sustainable, environmentally friendly interventions.

### GREENING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The technology for creating green office buildings and business models are well developed. Programs such as the Green Guide for Health Care, Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, and the Green Business Program at the Teleosis Institute offer detailed, well-organized tools to help health practitioners create green offices. A green office protects not only the health of

the building's occupants but also has a positive impact on the health of the local and global community. The steps to creating a green office vary if you are retrofitting an existing office or building an eco-friendly office from the ground up. Because most readers of this article are already working in established professional spaces, I will focus on how to green an existing office. (For information on building new clinic facilities see <http://www.gghc.org/>)

Several steps are required to green an existing clinic. The first is to monitor resource inputs and keep all systems maintained properly. There is nothing more wasteful than heating or air conditioning units that have not been serviced regularly. The second step is to evaluate and implement energy-efficiency measures. This is done in many ways, but most typically by using energy-efficient office equipment, changing to compact fluorescent bulbs, and providing simple strategies to lower general energy consumption, including turning off office equipment at night and managing room temperatures effectively.

The third step is put in place water conservation measures. Low-flow toilets and water faucets are easily added to any existing facility. Step four, chemical and waste management, requires some organizational planning. Most medical offices already separate infectious waste; however, most offices consume vast amounts of paper and plastic. Recycling measures that reduce waste are easily implemented. Much, if not all, of the office products necessary for health clinics can be purchased using environmentally friendly products such as recycled paper. In addition, shifting to more reusable products can produce significant cost savings.

Step four is often overlooked. In this step, transportation to and from the clinic is assessed. Clinics should be easily acces-

sible to mass transportation, and this information should be provided to staff and clients, encouraging them to make different choices about travel. Step five involves environmental purchasing. Purchasing products in bulk reduces unnecessary travel expenses, and purchasing from local providers supports regional economy. Finally, consideration of the environmental stresses of the workplace completes the necessary steps of creating a green healthcare facility. Proper lighting, healthy airflow, and ergonomic desks and chairs as well as other supportive choices minimize stress on the occupants of any facility, both staff and clientele.

These six steps may seem like a significant investment of time and energy. However, what is invested up front pays for itself in cost savings for energy use for the clinic, savings by the local waste facilities for proper waste management, and savings for the occupants by minimizing occupational illness. Facilities do not need to be converted overnight; these changes can be phased in over time. With a simple audit, practitioners can develop a plan to change slowly the existing office practices to more cost-saving, environmentally friendly business practices.

### BECOMING AN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE

The next stage of the integrated environmental health clinic involves becoming an environmental health advocate. The first step is to become familiar with the environmental issues within your own region, including air-, water-, and land-quality concerns. It is important to understand where the hot spots in your region are, if your clients live near them, and what issues are most prevalent in the area in which your clinic is located. By using Web resources and making connections with local agencies, you can easily find information about the local environment,

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which is the first step in beginning to recognize environmental illness.

Once you learn about the basic environmental issues in your area, you can begin to recognize the effects of local environmental issues on the health of your clients. For many professionals, this requires learning basic protocols for the evaluation and examination of patients. Most professionals quickly learn to ask a few simple questions to determine environmental exposure to toxics or the detrimental effects of living too close to a highway or an industrial plant. With this knowledge in hand, you will be better able to report environmental illness to public health officials and/or refer patients to environmental medical specialists.

This knowledge also has a larger, ripple effect. Local and regional governments will support the findings of medical providers who report environmental illness. Rather than placing the burden on environmental activists to mandate regulatory change, having medical evidence of environmental illness will greatly improve the ability of local regulatory agencies to prevent further environmental pollution.

Other important elements of environmental advocacy include supporting other green health professionals, promoting public health initiatives, patronizing other green businesses, becoming engaged with local environmental agencies and, ultimately, becoming a voice for green healthcare. Communities of green businesses are growing throughout the United States. Health care practitioners must learn to take leadership roles in these communities.

### **PRACTICING ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE MEDICINE**

To date, very few healthcare professionals have taken a hard look at the consequences of medical practices on the environment. There is a growing movement of

providers beginning to do just that. Leadership provided by HealthCare Without Harm and the Collaboration of Health and the Environment offers an opportunity to learn about the consequences of medical waste on the environment. Once professionals learn about downstream medical waste, they often begin to consider less toxic options for medical interventions. In addition, they learn that they can shift their reliance on single-use medical supplies toward more sustainable practices.

The goal of ESM is to encourage you as a healthcare professional to consider medical techniques that are less resource dependent. There are many alternative and mainstream choices that create no waste in their production and that are also safe, harmless, clean, nontoxic, nonpolluting, and cost-effective. By choosing to begin a medical intervention with a technique that meets the criteria of ESM, you can alleviate many of the unintended consequences of more costly and environmentally damaging high-tech and pharmaceutical interventions. Rather than seeing ESM practices as alternative to contemporary biomedicine, ESM can become the first line of defense offered by a healthcare system that provides leadership for a sustainable, healthy environment. When sustainable practices fail, patients must always retain the option of using techniques that produce a heavier environmental impact. However, in many cases, the ESM choices will succeed, greatly reducing the negative impact of medicine on the environment.

### **THE INTEGRATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CLINIC**

If more healthcare professionals were to create integrative environmental health clinics, it would greatly reduce the negative impact of healthcare on the environment and provide a higher quality of med-

ical care. Healthcare professionals can become leaders in creating a world based on sustainable healthcare in the context of a clean, healthy environment. In addition, integrative environmental health clinics are more cost-effective to run and therefore can potentially provide services more equitably, reaching more people, particularly underserved populations.

The healthcare professional of the 21st Century can and will provide the leadership necessary to create healthy environments and healthy people. The steps required to green healthcare include greening the built environment, becoming an environmental health advocate, and practicing ESM. Each small step you as a health professional take will greatly reduce medical waste and begin the necessary shift toward a healthy, sustainable planet. For more information contact [www.teleosis.org](http://www.teleosis.org).

### **RESOURCES**

- Health Care Without Harm:  
<http://www.noharm.org/>
- Collaboration on Health and the Environment:  
<http://www.cheforhealth.org/about/index.html>
- Hospitals for a Healthy Environment:  
<http://www.h2e-online.org/>
- Green Guide to Health Care:  
<http://www.gghc.org/>
- Teleosis Institute:  
[www.teleosis.org](http://www.teleosis.org)

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