



Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care

Seven years of helping to minimize
environmental impact

By Kent Waddington

The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care traces its roots back to October 21, 2000 when 27 representatives from some of Canada's largest healthcare associations and environmental groups met in Ottawa at an environmental educational day organized by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

Resulting from the daylong series of presentations on such diverse topics as energy efficiency, mercury reduction, PVC alternatives, dioxins, and pollution prevention, was agreement that a national coalition of the like-minded be formed. Other key participants were identified to be approached to become part of the group and shortly thereafter 22 groups provided their formal support for a national organization that chose as its mission the minimization of environmental impacts resulting from Canada's healthcare system.

Throughout the years the Coalition and its member groups have had a significant impact upon the greening of the Canadian healthcare landscape and have been involved in a very wide variety of local and national initiatives: mercury thermometer exchange events, the facilitation of an Environmental Management System (EMS) project with the Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention, publications such as "Doing Less Harm: Assessing and Reducing the Environmental and Health Impact of Canada's Health Care System," "Coalition Notes," Newsletters, the "Building Green Hospitals Checklist," and the Coalition LISTSERV.

They are particularly proud of the seven year association they forged with the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) that has resulted in the development and launch of the Green Health Care Awards, the Green Education Sessions held at the OHA's annual HealthAchieve conference, Canada's first and only healthcare trade show Green Lane, and the opportunity to showcase keynote speakers.

SPREADING AWARENESS

Environmentalists Justin Trudeau, Dr. David Suzuki and former Ontario Premier Bob Rae stressed that we are facing a crisis that can be prevented. Rae warned that we need to begin investigating the true determinants of health and that some serious choices must be made in public policy or they will be made for us by default.

Trudeau, speaking on behalf of the Coalition in 2006, made an impassioned plea for all Canadians to act responsibly towards our environment in our everyday actions, to look for different solutions to such simple things as everyday household cleaners and to find solutions that fit each of us individually.

"When this society fails," claims Trudeau, "we aren't going to be able to start up anywhere else. As Canadians, we need to find solutions and show the world how it works. Canada has so much to share with the world. It is our responsibility. We need to be brave and bold! We have things to achieve. Canada needs to provide solutions for the planet and we all need to get to work. We have to live the solutions and understand the responsibility. We have to make changes."

Dr. Suzuki's message was one of crisis and repercussions if we don't soon take responsibility and create concrete timelines and targets for a move to a sustainable way of life on this planet.

"We are not treating our Mother [earth] very well," says Suzuki. "What intelligent creature uses air as a toxic dump? Simply put, human beings are taking too much [natural resources] out of the environment and putting too much [waste] back in. We all contribute to the crisis we face on this planet by the daily choices we make: the food we buy and eat, the method of transportation we choose, the way we heat and cool our homes. Working together we can become a very powerful force for change."

THE GREEN LANE OFFERS SOLUTIONS

Working together for change is something the OHA's Director of Convention Exhibits Isabella Wai wholeheartedly supports. She has seen the results firsthand: high attendee traffic, another year with 16 green vendors, a sold-out Green Lane, and a waiting list.

The Green Lane has become very popular with attendees becoming a destination point for those who are embracing environmentally responsible healthcare delivery and are looking, more than ever, for green products and services to assist them in delivering on their commitment to patients. They are also recognizing the economic benefits that come from protecting the environment and are finding a wealth of knowledge from Green Lane vendors, many of which have conducted extensive research and development initiatives to address the many unique issues faced by healthcare facilities.

According to Wai, "HealthAchieve Show Management is very pleased with the working relationship it has developed with the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care over the past few years. The Green Lane has become a high-profile area on the show floor and each year, companies are eager to reserve an exhibit space to showcase their environmentally-friendly products and services to the healthcare sector."

VENTURING INTO GREEN TERRITORY

For those vendors who may just be venturing into environmentally-friendly waters, or who have products or services that offer a clear environmental benefit to the health services sector and have chosen not to position themselves in the Green Lane, the Coalition and OHA introduced the Venture Green initiative for 2007, acknowledging successful applicants with multi-coloured booth signage designed to attract more delegates to a vendor's exhibit space and act as catalyst to open green dialogue.

"The OHA will continue to work with the Coalition to expand and enhance green elements and features such as Venture Green on the show floor," says Wai. "Partnership with the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care has never been more important to us as we work towards promoting education and resources and move further into the green era that lies ahead."

New healthcare institutional members continue to be added to the roster of supporters, but the Coalition is also drawing interest from dozens of major Canadian corporations working within the sector and with this in mind the Coalition recently embarked upon a shift in emphasis to better address this new potential.

TIME FOR ACTION

At the time the Coalition was formed, few in the sector were thinking 'green' and even fewer had committed resources and funds to lessen their environmental impact.

Gladly we take credit for being a catalyst of change, having incited dialogue that resulted in such words as green, environmental responsibility, energy awareness, and mercury elimination becoming commonplace in hundreds of healthcare sites across Canada. Awareness of the problems is no longer an issue. Action is!

As the Coalition enters their 8th year they focus on providing a more active vehicle for enabling positive ecological change within the Canadian healthcare landscape and are working to be the premier, integrated green resource network, positively influencing the ecological impact of Canadian healthcare providers.

Those committed to sound environmental action plans in their facilities are now seeking credible vendors with which to deal. Many suppliers are now scrutinized by health facility purchasing departments and are being asked to submit details on such topics as the presence of an organizational Environmental Management System, whether the company is free of notices of violation regarding environmental permits, whether products contain lead and mercury, if post-consumer recycled materials are used in packaging, and whether products are free of chemical changes under normal use that could be of concern (such as leaching of chemicals from the material).

Some sites now are simply refusing to deal with vendors that do not meet a predetermined level of compliance.

More so than ever, companies are making the effort to be sound stewards of our environment and the Coalition is pleased to participate in making consumers more aware of these ever-expanding choices available to them. Coalition members are currently drafting a Green Purchasing Questionnaire for auditing vendor firms.

A recent strategy session hosted by the London Health Sciences Centre revealed a number of potential short and long-term

GREEN LANE VENDORS PROVIDE SOLUTIONS TO A NUMBER OF ISSUES INCLUDING ...

- surface and floor cleaning and disinfecting,
- reusable gowns, textiles and linens,
- indoor air quality (including scavenging of halogenated anesthetic agents commonly used in surgical procedures),
- biomedical waste disposal
- needle stick injuries,
- environmentally-friendly flooring, and;
- heating, cooling and filtration.

All these are contributing to environmental stewardship initiatives that are reducing waste, improving water and energy efficiency, using fewer toxic products and eliminating much of the pollution that once went into our atmosphere.



To the Left, Left to right:

Kent Waddington (founding member, Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care), Renée Cowlin (co-chair Green Team Chatham-Kent Health Alliance), Bruce Swan (President/CEO Royal Ottawa Health Care Group), Gideon Forman (Executive Director, Canadian Association of Physicians for the environment)

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initiatives to more rapidly move the green healthcare agenda forward: resource sharing, education, advocacy, partnerships, and program development. As the Coalition pursues these initiatives they encourage you to join them.

We are actively looking for enthusiastic and committed individuals (and their organizations) to take ownership of a wide variety of component pieces and assist in their creation and deployment: corporate sponsorship, partnerships with vendors, government organizations, affiliates and educational institutions, government liaison, environmental legislation compliance, membership, education, workshops and marketing, web content, best practices, case studies, seminars, workshops and conferences.

As a founding member of the Coalition, the Canadian Healthcare Engineering Society (CHES) continues to support Coalition initiatives through yearly financial contributions and organizational expertise.

Speaking at the recent London strategy session, CHES President Wayne McLellan, reaffirmed CHES's commitment saying: "CHES is very pleased to be associated with the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care and the great work it has done. We look forward to being an integral part of the Coalition as it evolves into Canada's leading green resource network."

The Coalition remains strongly committed to being an active vehicle for enabling positive ecological change within the Canadian healthcare landscape and encourages you to contact them at feedback@greenhealthcare.ca. ■

Kent Waddington is a founding member of CCGHC.