

Environmental Health Advocacy

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Medical professionals are becoming increasingly aware of the effects a compromised environment has on human health. Because the environment is in constant flux, becoming an environmental health advocate is a step you can take to identify early signs of environmental illness and improve patient care. Environmental health advocacy means educating yourself, your patients, and your community about local issues. This is best done by partnering with local environmental organizations—a merger that has the added benefit of modeling leadership for others while protecting the health of everyone.

To develop environmental advocacy skills involves deepening personal values and taking actions; understanding environmental health issues; and engaging colleagues, patients, and the community as a whole. Below are action-oriented strategies for integrating sustainability into a professional practice.

Deepening Personal Values and Taking Action

On a philosophical level

- Reconnect with the natural world and your passion and purpose for environmental action.
- Distinguish your values and ideas about the importance of nature in health and healing.

On a practical level

- Assess your current level of environmental activism and identify opportunities for advancing action (eg, identify potential partnerships, hold workshops and seminars, and write articles).
- Identify any personal obstacles in committing more deeply to being an environmental advocate (eg, time, resources, or networks).
- Green your workplace to provide a safe and healthy space for clients, staff, and your community. (For more information on how to green your workplace, see “Environmentally Preferable Purchasing,” *IMCJ*. 2008;7.1:32.)

Understanding Local Environmental Health Issues

- Name various industries or practices in your area that contribute to pollution or toxicity and identify the resulting problems (eg, incidence of asthma in relation to transit of diesel trucks in West Oakland, California).
- Visit www.scorecard.org to learn about local environmental issues specific to your community and the companies responsible for toxic release (ie, if you live in Hazelwood, Missouri, the Ford Motor Co St Louis Assembly is one of the largest polluters). This site also explains how associated toxins affect human health.

Check out the following environmental health resources:

- Teleosis Institute, www.teleosis.org
- Scorecard: the pollution information site, www.scorecard.org
- Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov
- Environmental Working Group, www.ewg.org
- Collaboration for Health and the Environment, www.healthandenvironment.org

- Learn the signs and symptoms of environmental illness and identify which demographics are most commonly impacted.
- Attend lectures, conferences, and meetings to better understand current environmental issues and strategies for improvement.

Engaging Colleagues, Patients, and the Community

Once you have all your information gathered, it is then time to go out and put it to use.

- Educate colleagues on the benefits of “greening” their practices and encourage them to undertake the same educational outreaches.
- Partner with local organizations or community groups that address health and/or the environment and bring to them your understanding of and commitment to environmental health.
- Create an environmental-health working group with other professionals to promote human and ecological health in your community.
- Talk to your patients on a regular basis about health and the environment.
- Offer lectures in your community on the relationship between the health and the environment.
- Write articles for newsletters, newspapers, and magazines about local environmental health issues or your green office practices.

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