

Green Meetings

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So here's the thing. If you live in the Montreal area, and plan to fly to Calgary and back for the SOGC's Annual Clinical Meeting, you will as a result be responsible for about 0.7 tonnes of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. According to one calculator, in terms of contribution to climate change that's equivalent to me leaving all the lights in my house on, day and night, for five months. Isn't guilt a terrible feeling? Whether or not you believe the predictions of eco-pessimists, that amount of carbon dioxide is significant. Several international airlines, including our own, have established carbon-offset programs to allow travellers to ease their conscience about leaving such a trail. In Air Canada's program, an additional \$11.20 is the charge for offsetting the Montreal–Calgary round trip—by subsidizing the planting of trees by a non-profit organization. Will you pay it?

You may be sceptical, but I would argue it is time for us, as medical professionals, to think seriously about responsible travel and sustainable meetings. Unfortunately, even the language of “green” activity carries a whiff of disapproval, suggesting that it is not possible to be green and at the same time enjoy it. Indeed, some degree of self-sacrifice is required if we are to minimize our personal effect on the environment, and self-sacrifice is a tough sell. But it would be deeply ironic if, on the one hand, we strenuously advocated disease prevention (think Pap smears and prenatal care), while on the other hand we were silent about prophylaxis for the environment. We expect our patients to comply with our recommendations, even if we don't call it compliance; it is only fair that we ourselves also do what's right.

In Canada, we have some juggling to do. Resource management is a large part of the economy. Canada is the second-largest country in the world, and the country's population is widely dispersed. The Canadian winter can be apocalyptic, with both physical and emotional consequences for the population. So Canadians require a lot of

resource processing, travelling, and warming to keep the country competitive and to maintain acceptable living standards, and each of these activities—surprise!—has a major environmental effect. According to the reports from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Canada's greenhouse gas emissions increased by 25.3% between 1990 and 2005; if land use, land use change and forestry activities were included, Canada's emissions increased by 54.2%.^{1,2} It would be hypocritical for us to point to other countries as more significant despoilers of the environment. But the economic imperative, like it or not, means we must juggle how much of these activities we allow.

For those of us who are not immediately involved in management of primary resources, travel is currently the most visible environmental consideration. Driving a hybrid vehicle is seen as a badge of environmental sensitivity, regardless of its overall effect, and the automotive industry is already acting on consumer preferences for smaller, more fuel-efficient and less polluting vehicles. Air travel has also seen some changes: new aircraft are being promoted not just because they offer a more comfortable trip but also because they are more fuel efficient. The carbon offset programs are accelerating, and not just for air travel. Some car rental companies (but not, it should be noted, the biggest ones) are also offering an offset program. Thus, if travel is essential, it is possible to limit the environmental consequences. Contributing to a carbon offset program is a responsible thing for us to do.

Is my conscience appeased if I travel to a meeting and contribute to a carbon offset program? Not really, because the basket of fruit that the hotel management left in my room—sorry, your room—contains fruit that is definitely not local. While the growers are happy to have sold what they grew, its transportation resulted in more emissions. The waste produced by conventions will require transportation, sometimes over long distances, to waste management facilities. These issues and a host of others (such as the energy efficiency of the meeting facility, waste water management, the materials used in construction of the facility, and the emissions of these materials) have led to the

recognition that sustainability should be a major consideration for meeting facilities under development. The planned Vancouver Convention Centre expansion is a Canadian example of construction that is intended to be certified as LEED, showing leadership in energy and environmental design.³ Other meeting sites are likely to seek this acronym. If we, as medical professionals, are sincere in wanting to protect the health of the environment as well as the health of our patients, we should pay attention to the sustainability of our meeting facilities.

Well, now that you ask, I will indeed be attending the meeting in Calgary, because the professional benefits and

enjoyable social activities are too much to pass up. But I will also purchase carbon offsets—and I will plant an extra tree myself. I may be no greenhorn, but I can still be green.

REFERENCES

1. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Greenhouse gas inventory data. Graph 3. Available at: http://unfccc.int/ghg_emissions_data/items/3800.php. Accessed April 6, 2008.
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