

CMA votes to divest from fossil fuels

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) took an historic stand Aug. 26 when general council delegates agreed to divest CMA of its holdings in fossil-fuel companies.

It has taken three years for a group of ecologically minded doctors to get the motion passed — a move they now hope will demonstrate that Canadian physicians are ready to be leaders against climate change. Dr. Courtney Howard, a delegate from Yellowknife and a board member of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, presented the divestment motion.

“When the health effects of tobacco became known, the CMA quickly changed its investments. In times of climate change, health organizations around the world are divesting in fossil fuels,” Howard said. Both the British Medical Association and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians have already divested, while the International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations, representing over one million students in 119 countries, supports divestment.

There was some opposition to the divestment motion among CMA delegates. Dr. Richard Johnston, president of the Alberta Medical Association, wanted to refer the motion back to the CMA Board of Directors to garner further information. “There are a large number of economic, political and public policy issues related to this. I don’t think we should take [a decision] over a two-minute discussion.”

Dr. Brendan Lewis, CMA’s honorary treasurer, also favoured referring the motion to the board in order to understand the motion’s impact and scope, and to time the plan in order to “mitigate risk.”

But the third time was a charm as the motion passed, although the vote was close with 56% of delegates favouring divestment and 43% opposing.

Howard wasn’t surprised by the oppo-



Dr Hannah Shoichet

Dr. Courtney Howard presented a motion at CMA General Council calling on the association to divest from fossil fuels.

sition. “It’s a new concept and doctors are really just getting a sense of how big a health issue climate change is.”

CMA’s decision to divest is mostly a “symbolic gesture,” said Dr. Ewan Affleck, the Yellowknife physician who seconded the motion. In fact, the motion only pertains to CMA’s \$29-million reserve fund, 6% — or \$1.8 million — of which is invested in fossil-fuel companies. The decision does not apply to MD Financial Management Inc., a CMA-owned financial company that manages more than \$40 billion in investments for physicians.

MD’s Executive Vice President of Member Solutions Mike Gassewitz said he has been working on the issue since meeting with Howard at the 2014 general council. Gassewitz told *CMAJ* earlier in August that over the next few months MD will conduct market research to find the best way to provide members with a low-carbon investment fund.

CMA general council approved two other climate-related motions at the

meeting. One called on the CMA to explore investment opportunities in renewable energy solutions. The other urged the association to promote the positive health impacts of pricing carbon emissions. Howard said a carbon tax is a good way to lower greenhouse gas emissions, as has been demonstrated in British Columbia where a fossil-fuel tax has reduced consumption by 16%. “It will also lower local air pollution,” said Howard, “and as we know, local air pollution is responsible for one in eight deaths worldwide according to the WHO [World Health Organization].”

CMA President Dr. Cindy Forbes said, “Given this clear direction from the CMA membership, the CMA will move to make this transition as soon as possible.”

Younger delegates also praised CMA’s decision. Dr. Ritika Goel, a first-time attendee at the meeting, voted in favour of divestment. “I think it was a historic moment for the CMA,” said the 31-year-old physician from Toronto. “We can set an example for other large organizations, institutions and professional associations. In many ways I think it’s the spirit of the motion that’s really important and it shows physicians as leaders, which is where we should be.”

The CMA has already decided that next year’s general council meeting will have a focus on climate change and health. The keynote speaker on the topic is expected to be Dr. James Orbinski, who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize as then-president of The International Council of Médecins sans Frontières and who speaks internationally on climate change and health.

“It’s culture change and it’s education,” said Howard. “I think the evidence is so clear and the ethics are so clear that it was really just a matter of time before people understood enough of it to feel confident enough to take action.” — Shannon Lough, *CMAJ*

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