

Hospitals leaving huge “ecological footprints”: report

A family physician who assessed the size of a Vancouver hospital’s “ecological footprint” says her findings show that hospitals have a “huge” impact on the environment. The footprint is a calculation of how much land is needed to support the consumption of resources and production of waste by a person, nation or other entity. Dr. Susan Germaine determined that the Lions Gate Hospital in North Vancouver has an ecological footprint covering at least 2841 hectares — 739 times its actual size. The city of Vancouver’s footprint is 180 times its total area.

Neurologists worried

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received EEGs during the 6-year period are expected to receive amounts ranging from \$1000 to \$130 000. Under the settlement, Wilson denied any responsibility for causing the problem. He still faces a hearing before the Ontario college.

Writing in *CMAJ* in 2000, the public health team that investigated the case concluded that guidelines were not followed at the Toronto clinics. “As stated in the guidelines,” it included, “it is preferable to use noninvasive techniques (e.g., disk electrodes) rather than invasive ones (e.g., subdermal electrodes).”

Dr. Gerald Tullio, a community neurologist at the William Osler Health Centre in Brampton, Ont., considers the case a wake-up call. He said he makes a point of opening new packages of electrodes in front of patients to help dispel any fears that products are being reused.

Tullio said many neurologists are worried about the impact the case will have on their malpractice fees, but Françoise Parent of the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA) thinks the impact will be small because “assumptions [were] made about the cost of [this] class-action suit 6 years ago.” Ontario neurologists will pay \$7116 for coverage in 2002. — *Brad Mackay*, Toronto

Germaine, a member of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), conducted the assessment for her thesis in environmental science. She says her estimate is conservative because there is no way to gauge the total impact of toxins, chemicals, new medical equipment and supplies used at the hospital.

Despite these limitations, Germaine says the notion of a footprint provides a clear illustration of hospitals’ environmental impact and allows comparisons among facilities and over time.

For example, the hospital uses 1.75 million pairs of gloves per year — 8.2 pairs per patient per day. “Who knows how many gloves are used across Canada,” says CAPE chair Dr. Trevor Hancock. “It’s an apt symbol of the problem. We have to ask ourselves: ‘Is there a way of reducing this and maintaining safety?’”

The footprint experiment is featured in North America’s most comprehensive report on the greening of health care, *Doing less harm: assessing and reducing the environmental and health impact of Canada’s health care system*. It was funded by Health Canada and published by the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care (www.greenhealthcare.ca), a group of 12 health and environmental organizations, including the CMA. The



Big feet: A hospital’s ecological footprint is based on the land required to absorb the waste produced and provide the resources consumed.

report documents the impact of hospitals’ solid and liquid wastes and air emissions on the environment (see page 354) and looks at ways to reduce the impact.

The coalition is lobbying governments to help hospitals switch to more environmentally friendly practices. Hancock thinks most health care institutions will “be green” within 5 years. “There’s growing awareness, but the bigger challenge will be to get people to appreciate the economic, legal, community and health benefits of going green.”

Copies of *Doing less harm* are available for \$10 from tea@web.net. — *Barbara Sibbald*, CMAJ

Last chance for input on new herbal regulations

Five years after the federal government decided it needed some control over the sale of natural health products, new regulations are almost ready to be put in place. Canadians have until March 22 to voice their concerns about the regulations, and an updated version should be published in the *Canada Gazette*, Part II, by this summer. Afterwards, manufacturers will have 2 years to have their products assessed and receive a product licence and product identification number, the equivalent of the drug identification numbers used for prescription drugs.

The Natural Health Products Directorate will have to assess an estimated 25 000 to 30 000 products, including herbal preparations, vitamins, minerals, traditional medicines, plants and homeopathic preparations.

Under the regulations, labels will include directions for use, a list of medicinal and nonmedicinal ingredients, and any cautions, contraindications or known adverse reactions associated with the product. Manufacturers will also be allowed to make evidence-based health claims.

To comment on the proposed regulations, contact the Natural Health Products Directorate, 171 Slater St., 9th Floor, Ottawa, ON K1A 0L3; nhpd_general@hc-sc.gc.ca. — *CMAJ*