



## Online Course Helps Nurses 'Go Green'

By: Rita Marie Barsella, RN, BSN, MSJ  
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The “go green” trend is gaining momentum and is penetrating the sterile confines of hospitals. Nurses across the country are learning about green health care and sustainable medicine — relatively new terms for many healthcare practitioners — through an online course offered by the Teleosis Institute called “Leadership in Green Health.”

Green health care and sustainable medicine are considered environmentally friendly ways of practicing medicine — ways intended to decrease hazardous work environments and hazardous waste while conserving Earth’s resources.

At a time when environmental concerns are on the minds of American voters and politicians, several industries have taken a second look at their policies, production methods, products, and waste management. Health care, as an industry, has arrived late to the green table.

“The healthcare industry is catching up very slowly with what other industries are doing,” says Joel Kreisberg, DC, MA, founder and executive director of the Teleosis Institute. “In the last two to three years, we have joined the mainstream and gone green. If we are going to create a sustainable future, health care needs to be a part of it. Health care is the second largest part of the GDP (gross domestic product). How can we have a sustainable society without sustainable medicine?”

Kreisberg defines sustainable medicine as medicine that focuses on prevention and wellness. He says studies show that emphasizing prevention and wellness delays the onset of chronic illnesses, which, in turn, conserves money and resources. Kreisberg argues that sustainable medicine involves promoting healthy lifestyles and wellness before sickness occurs, and it involves a conservative approach to prescribing medications in comparison to conventional medicine.

“Green health care is partly about the medicine you are practicing,” says Kreisberg. “But it also is about the products you buy, the building you work in, and the communities you live in. Environmental issues are inseparable from health issues. It’s happening all around us. Our program focuses on getting this information down to the medical staff.”

“Leadership in Green Health,” an eight-week online course, will be offered four times during 2008. Niyati Desai, associate director for the Teleosis Institute, says the course presents research and theory supporting the integration of sustainability into medicine and engages participants to recognize the link between the environment, medicine, and human health. She says the goal of the course is to teach providers how to develop tangible strategies for bringing sustainability into their medical practices.

“For individual practitioners, sustainable medicine means something different,” says

Desai. “A green or sustainable health practice will look different to a nurse, a pediatrician, a chiropractor, or an acupuncturist. By presenting the need and the scientific foundation for sustainable medicine, the course supports providers as they define what sustainable medicine means and looks like to them.”

Desai says some examples of green health care include eliminating products that contain mercury and polyvinylchloride, decreasing the amount of hazardous waste that requires incineration, and starting a pharmacy “take back” program for unused medications.

Ann Fuller, a nurse at University Community Hospital in Tampa, Fla., says she has maintained an environmentally friendly lifestyle most of her adult life and is looking for ways to bring the concept of environmental health into her workplace. She is taking the Teleosis course.

Fuller says she participated in a hazardous materials survey released online in December by the organization Health Care Without Harm (HCWH). Based on the responses of 1,500 nurses, the survey concluded that healthcare environments can be harmful. According to HCWH, nurses are continually exposed to “low-level” doses of hazardous materials amounting to cumulative negative effects on nurses’ health. The survey says possible negative effects include cancer, asthma, miscarriage, and birth defects. The listed hazardous materials include medication residues, radiation, mercury, anesthetic gases, latex, and disinfecting/sterilizing chemicals.

Fuller says chemicals and toxins used in hospitals are healthcare and other personnel that work regularly at the hospital.

“I would like to become an effective change agent,” says Fuller. “This class is about getting the right tools to do that.”

Toni Marthaller-Andersen, MSN, FNP-C, a family nurse practitioner at a rural health clinic on Whidbey Island, Wash., is a graduate of the Teleosis course. She says she started questioning the safety and sustainability of some of the treatments she was prescribing for her patients and realized there were some positive changes she and other practitioners could make in their practice. By taking the course, Marthaller-Andersen says she was looking for motivation and resources to start a pharmacy take back program for Whidbey Island. Although she has not completed her mission, the process has started. She says she learned that part of that process involves motivating administrators and staff about green health care.

“People are waking up and providers are waking up,” says Marthaller-Andersen. “The thought paradigm in which toxins are only a problem if you have an acute exposure is shifting to a new and more frightening reality. The greatest health hazards are the chronic, low-level exposures happening on a daily basis.

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