



## GREENING YOUR PRACTICE

# Surf's Up! Green Health Care Grows From a Ripple to a Wave

By Janet Brown



In 1991, when I convinced Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City to create the position of "Waste Manager" and hire me to fill it, I ended up with an "office" next to the fax machine, across the street from the hospital in the Facilities Department. I was the "Garbage Lady," the "Waste Woman." This was not glamorous work and there were not many resources out there.

Medical environmentalism was barely a ripple back then. Those of us who were interested in trying to create greener, healthier health care facilities had to start from scratch, learning by trial and error. While I was at Beth Israel, I would talk to the workers, and we'd try something out. If it didn't work, we tried something else—for 13 educational years! Learning by doing—that's how we truly know something, and it is why a diverse group of individuals in any practice setting can steer their ship towards environmental sustainability. No one can add more value than those that do the work every day.

I'm happy to say that things have changed a whole lot since 1991, and health care professionals interested in greening their clinics need not start from scratch, as we did back then. Greener cleaners, safer building materials, mercury-free equipment and many other ecologically oriented products are increasingly available. New ideas and new visions—"healing environments," "evidence-based design," "environmentally responsible care"—are heard more and more in the health care industry.

What was once a mere trickle of resources has become a wave of "green" products and "sustainable" services. From the shore, water looks great—fresh, green, and salty! But when you dive under, it can be a bit murky and hard to see. Once you're in the green health care wave, it doesn't always look quite the way it did from the shore. Those of us who've been in the field for a while are certainly grateful to see more attention paid to environmental issues in health care. Unfortunately, though, not everything washing in on the "sustainable" wave is as green as it may seem.

As is the case with the terms "organic," "free-range" or "grass-fed" in the food industry, there's not a whole lot of regulatory oversight on the use of words like "environmentally-friendly," "sustainable," or "green," when applied to cleaning products, building supplies or health care products. There really aren't any federal standards, and this leaves a lot of room for false claims. Let's face it, just like the surge in organic foods, that big green wave hitting our shores has a lot of vendors rushing to put on their surfer shorts! They see that wave and some thoughts turn to another kind of green. "It's Sustainable! It's totally nontoxic! It's eco friendly! It's integral to a healing environment!" We're hearing these claims more and more.

Everyone likes to ride a wave. But as health professionals, we have to know which waves to ride and which to duck and dive right through. We can educate ourselves and each other, so we can more easily read through all the claims, descriptions, and product literature to determine what a product really is, and whether it is truly green.

It can be hard to ascertain just what is the right thing to do when trying to green your practice. Fortunately, you aren't sitting alone by the fax machine like I was back in '91! There are some excellent resources now available to help guide you. Third party certification programs like Green Seal ([www.greenseal.org](http://www.greenseal.org)) for greener products and services, and EPEAT ([www.epeat.net](http://www.epeat.net)) for environmentally preferred electronics purchasing, have done a lot of the homework for us.

There are also guidance documents like the **Green Guide for Health Care** ([www.gghc.org](http://www.gghc.org)), a self-certifying toolkit to assist health care professionals in greener health care design, building, and operations. The **Hospitals for a Healthy Environment** program ([www.h2e-online.org](http://www.h2e-online.org)), a not-for-profit organization for which I am the Partner Coordinator, provides a way for health care providers to join a community of like-minded individuals working together to collectively shift the culture of health care toward environmental responsibility. With web-based tools, monthly educational teleconferences, a newsletter and a list-serve, H2E facilitates the flow of ideas and allows members to share their successes.

**Health Care Without Harm** ([www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)) is an international coalition that has been working for years to transform the health care industry worldwide, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to public health and the environment. HCWH has made elimination of mercury and polyvinyl chloride two of their key goals, and they have a lot of resources to guide

physicians who want to join in this effort. HCWH's current projects include green building and design, getting healthier foods in health care facilities, and working with group purchasing organizations on environmentally preferable purchasing.

The **Teleosis Institute** ([www.teleosis.org](http://www.teleosis.org)) has taken on the mission of developing effective, sustainable health care provided by professionals who wish to serve as environmental stewards. Teleosis has a particular focus on smaller, office-based practice settings, and it runs a number of programs to educate health professionals about the principles and practices of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine.

In our age of excess, where computers are upgraded every 2 years, glutaraldehyde is used as a soap in open basins, and antibiotics are in our drinking water, it is high-time to stop flushing, pouring, and dumping, and take a good long look at what we're doing. Then, we need to take responsibility and take action. Just as the medical community has begun to challenge the junk food and soda industries, and questioning pharmaceutical marketing practices, health care professionals need to take action to increase the sustainability and decrease the environmental toxicity of our facilities and our practices.

The resources are there to help guide us and help us take a smart look at the current state of affairs. Sometimes the waves come in quickly, and it can be hard to know at what point to jump in. In the case of medical environmentalism, it is not so important when you jump in, but simply that you do jump in. If you need help, just give a shout. We're here to throw you a line.

*Janet Brown is the Partner Coordinator at Hospitals for a Healthy Environment. H2E is creating a national movement for environmental sustainability in health care. Jointly founded by the American Hospital Association, the US Environmental Protection Agency, Health Care Without Harm and the American Nurses Association, H2E educates health care professionals about pollution prevention, rewards the sector's best performers, and provides a wealth of practical tools and resources to facilitate health care's movement toward environmental sustainability.*  
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