

Sometimes the best medicine is having a healthy place to live

For over 3 decades, Doctors of BC has understood the importance of being able to communicate with the public, doctors, government, and others on matters of disease prevention and issues of public health in ways that transcend any economic benefit for physicians.

Medicine is an odd profession. There are very few groups that work tirelessly to eliminate the need for their services. But doctors do this every day by adopting and advocating for various discoveries, preventive practices, and policies that put them in a position where their services are no longer required. The Environmental Health Committee is proud to have been part of that legacy for doctors in BC.

Over the years, the committee has been able to advise the Doctors of BC Board of Directors on matters relating to the effects of the surroundings on our health. Our activities make up part of a long record that includes the work of many committees operating under the Council on Health Promotion.

Many members of our association do not know all of the topics the committee has addressed, nor will they be aware of the many ways in which the committee has made a difference in public health in British Columbia. Offered here is a brief sampling of those accomplishments and some thoughts on future initiatives.

The committee has, over the years, dealt with topics ranging from pollutants in air, water, and soil, to policies affecting regulation of sewage systems, to the laws concerning secondhand

smoke, to calls that government should include health impact assessments in all matters relating to industrial projects, to the impact of climate change on human health.

The committee has also helped project environmental stewardship policies at the national level. Two examples are Canadian Medical Association resolutions on the prudent use of

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antibiotics (the CMA supports regulations to severely limit the use of medically important antibiotics on animals being raised for human consumption) and a call for Canada-wide environmental health impact assessments (the CMA supports a comprehensive federal environmental review process, including health impact studies, for all industrial projects).

The built environment has also received attention from our committee. We have:

- Worked provincially and with the CMA to call attention to the monitoring and remediation of radon levels in private homes.
- Called attention to the precarious nature of steep staircases.
- Investigated issues with indoor wood-burning stoves.

In recent years, the committee has assisted in the implementation of mandatory dangerous heavy metal blood levels in an effort to identify cases of lead and mercury poisoning. A call to study the health effects of noise pollution is also one of our past activities.

In the last few months, the committee was proud to produce a climate change and human health position statement that outlines commitments and recommendations from Doctors of BC on this pressing issue.

As COHP transitions to a new project-based structure, we see opportunities ahead in the arena of environmental health, including:

- Evaluating mitigation and adaptation strategies for doctors and the health care system in light of climate change.
- Improving water quality data and its surveillance.
- Addressing vaping and other types of nicotine use in young people.
- Applying an equity lens of environmental health and justice, particularly related to the care of First Nations populations.
- Developing an understanding of the environmental burden of disease on human health.

This list will form part of a series of recommendations for action by the Environmental Health Committee to the COHP and will inform our association's ongoing efforts in this area. ■

—Lloyd Oppel, MD

Chair, Environmental Health Committee

This article is the opinion of the Environmental Health Committee, a subcommittee of Doctors of BC's Council on Health Promotion, and is not necessarily the opinion of Doctors of BC. This article has not been peer reviewed by the BCMJ Editorial Board.