

# Fight climate change and save money—go green at your practice

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Physicians who adopt environmentally sustainable activities will provide long-lasting benefits for the planet and their patients, while receiving a financial payoff starting as soon as their practice's very next electric bill.

An AMA guide, "Lower costs by going green!" (PDF) provides simple, quickly achievable steps in maintaining an environmentally sustainable medical practice. It includes links to other reputable sites with even more detailed information.

Physicians are a part of a health care industry that contributes nearly a tenth of the nation's emissions of carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse gasses linked to climate change. Put another way, if the industry were a country it would place 13th in the world in terms of greenhouse gas output—its "carbon footprint."

The effects of climate change "have direct implications for health care," says the AMA's guide, citing a study regarding the direct impact on "changing patterns of disease and mortality."

While taking part in the long-term work of healing the environment, physicians can experience an immediate and substantial drop in the cost of running a practice.

"Most practices can save \$2,000 per physician, per year or more" by adopting wise environmental sustainability standards, says gastroenterologist Todd L. Sack, MD, an AMA member who is a long-time environmental advocate within organized medicine and in his home state of Florida.

Dr. Sack is the editor of MyGreenDoctor.org, a free, comprehensive guide to medical practice environmental sustainability, a joint project of the World Medical Association, Florida Medical Association, the Florida Academy of Family Physicians and Physicians for Social Responsibility. The site's list of 10 reasons to go green—also included in the AMA's guide—says that payoffs come in more ways than just dollars and cents.

According to the guide, an eco-friendlier practice:

- Is a wiser and more responsible uses of resources.
- Saves money.
- Creates a healthier work environment.
- Facilitates team building.
- Generates ideas from every member of your office.
- Improves employee retention.
- Enhances public relations.
- Contributes to a decrease in pollution.
- Builds a healthier community.
- Makes environmental sustainability part of your life.

Like the AMA's guide, My Green Doctor focuses on the easy steps that can be taken by even the smallest medical practices. The resource is physician-written and evidence-based. Physician practices get a waiting room certificate for registering, plus lots of tips for having a successful green team.

Physicians might balk at one more thing to do, but Dr. Sack points out the doctor's essential contribution is to get the ball rolling.

"The doctor can be the leader who engages the office to get started on this, but it shouldn't take the physician very much or any time once they inspire their office to get started," he said.

My Green Doctor explains how a "green team" made up of staff members can be set up in less than 15 minutes. Teams meet once a month over lunch to share ideas, making changes that are suggested by My Green Doctor, and track progress.

Find out how physicians can see health care through a climate lens.

## 4 simple ways to go green

What the team should focus on first are easy changes that can have a big impact. The AMA guide lists these four.

### Establish a "turn off" policy

Whenever possible, "make it a practice-wide rule to completely turn off computers, lights, printers, and fax and copy machines at the end of each day."

## Reset your thermostats

During working hours, there are only two temperature settings to remember: 68 degrees in winter and 74 degrees in the summer. When the office is closed for the night, raise or lower those temperatures, depending on the season. Programmable thermostats will do the work for you.

## Upgrade your light bulbs

Light-emitting diode and compact fluorescent lamp lighting last up to 25 times longer than incandescent bulbs, while using 75% less energy.

## Reduce and recycle waste

Buy in bulk, buy recycled—including the packaging—and when done with it, recycle it again. Make sure recycling bins are conveniently placed throughout the office. There are many ways to cut use of paper, including double-sided printing and the electronic health record. Switch to a digital fax system that receives faxes by email instead of paper.

For the long run, physician practices will want to embrace a culture of environmental sustainability, adding new policies and procedures. That includes setting goals, measuring progress and making adjustments along the way. At this stage, financial resources can be committed to initiatives that go beyond initial, low-cost activities.

The guide gives two examples. Solar thermal systems that heat water require investment but offer long-lasting savings. “Green power”—electricity generated from renewable resources—is widely available. It can cost more, but practices may choose that option as part of their commitment to environmental sustainability.

Among many other advantages, telehealth is an environmentally efficient solution, lowering the carbon footprint of both the practice and its patients. Check out the AMA STEPS Forward™ toolkit on adopting telemedicine.

Learn more about AMA policy on advocacy for environmental sustainability and climate.