



Canadian Nursing Students' Association
Association des étudiant(e)s infirmier(ère)s du Canada

Position Statement #1

Our Planet's Health is Our Health

Environmental Stewardship and Implications on Human Health

Submitted: December 4, 2015, Revised Submission- January 8, 2016

Submitted to: Board of Directors

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BACKGROUND

The impacts of health service delivery upon our environment have long been factors that nursing students across the country evaluate and try to improve upon for patients in their care. Often what we do not critically analyze enough are the ecosystems or natural environments in which we develop, live, work and deliver care. Health care in Canada is a major contributor of greenhouse gas emissions producing about 2.1 per cent of Canada's total greenhouse gas emissions yet is defended on the basis of infection control (Hancock, 2001; Shaner-McRae, McRae & Jas, 2007). The International Council of Nurses (ICN) (2008), states that nurses worldwide have shared responsibility to protect our natural environment. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) (2008) state every nurse should have a practical understanding of engagement in environmental health issues and have committed to the importance of the intersections of the health care sector and environmental responsibility through a joint position (CNA, 2009).

The Lancet (2015) states that we are seeing and feeling the effects of climate change already and that future predictions demonstrate an alarming and "potentially catastrophic risk



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to human health” (p. 1861). The Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change (2015) predicts ill health effects such as increased heat stress, drought, floods, increased frequency of intense storms, pollution, spread of disease vectors, increased parasitic disease, food insecurity and under-nutrition, increase of tropical disease in more northern locations, displacement and migration, and ill mental health if the global average temperatures rise is more than 2 degrees Celsius (p. 1861; Barlow, 2008).

A recent study released by the Canadian Public Health Association (Hancock et al 2015) updates past reports and ‘considerably expands the Canadian Public Health Association’s 1992 report on human and ecosystem health, but with a heightened sense of urgency, because of the relentless, dramatic, and compounding impact of human activity on our ecosystems since then.’ The report provides an overview of the ecological determinants of health, implications for public health and an agenda for action.

Canadian Nursing Students’ Association (CNSA) POSITION

The Canadian Nursing Students’ Association (CNSA) believes it is imperative that all Canadian nursing students take personal and professional responsibility for negative impacts of health care service delivery on the environment that contribute to negative health outcomes, directly and indirectly. This action is not only imperative, but must be undertaken in a timely manner to reduce negative impacts on our natural environment. To do otherwise would result in serious negative health outcomes that will occur worldwide and impact vulnerable populations. Vulnerability to climate change is linked to the ability of populations to cope and adapt to extreme weather events, leaving the poorest and most poverty-stricken communities most at risk, as well as older adults, women, children and those with comorbid conditions (Smith et al., 2014).

Nursing students have a unique responsibility as future health care leaders. They will deal first hand with patients and communities experiencing negative health outcomes stemming directly from the impacts of poor environmental responsibility practices and a lack of action on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

CNSA believes nursing students can have a positive impact at the individual patient level, helping to promote positive environmentally-responsible actions through education on consumerism, food choices, transportation and waste reduction, toxics reduction and energy consumption practices. Nursing students also must lead by example, exercising sound judgment and subscribing to practices that do not negatively impact the environment.

CNSA believes nursing students should be involved in lobbying at all levels of policy. Canadian nursing students are well educated with knowledge bases in health science, political science, and social sciences and should be reaching out to municipal, regional, provincial,



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and federal governments to ensure sound environmental stewardship practices are not only prioritized, but acted upon for the health of Canada's population and our global community. Nursing students should also reach out to provincial regulatory and professional associations to ensure the nursing profession is doing its part to foster the widest possible opportunities for stakeholders to deliver sustainable health care practices.

CNSA strives to be the primary resource for nursing students across Canada and will advocate for education around environmental stewardship training and health to be included in chapter schools across Canada. CNSA will provide learning opportunities for nursing students across Canada through regional and national conferences and committee work.

Sound environmental stewardship requires strong strategic partnerships and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. CNSA will seek to create and nurture new partnerships with organizations that have aligning interests such as the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) associate group Canadian Nurses for Health and the Environment, the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care, and Healthcare Without Harm for collaboration on future advocacy, education and research.

Relation to Canadian Nursing School Curriculum

Global health and the determinants of health are included in entry-to-practice competencies at the provincial level throughout Canada. However, upon evaluation of the inclusion of climate change and environmental sustainability content in 42 Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs across Canada, Kennedy and Power (2011) found that less than half (42%) of schools included these topics in their curriculum. As the primary resource for nursing students across Canada, and climate change being one of the largest and most significant current threats to public and global health, CNSA must advocate for this to be included in curriculum in all our chapter schools. Nursing students must be prepared to be competent practitioners who will be providing care to those suffering from ill health associated with poor environmental stewardship and the degradation of our natural environment.

Conclusion

The Canadian Nursing Students' Association believes all nursing students must take personal and professional responsibility for the impacts their care delivery has on the natural environment that ultimately can lead to negative health outcomes. CNSA as an organization will continue to further advocate, provide resources to nursing students and engage in research around the natural environment and health.

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