



# Being an Environmental Steward in the Workplace

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Michael L. Ma and Vivian Ip

For me, the definition of wellness is any aspect of my life which brings happiness, peace and balance. First and foremost to me is my family, our health and my career. These are all aspects which are directly impacted by my personal passion, environmental protection. Anyone who has been brought up with the formative and prominent ‘ozone hole’ news stories of the 90 s has always appreciated the concern of an ever-worsening environmental crisis. We cannot avoid daily reminders that these cornerstones to our wellness and happiness are directly impacted by climate change.

For my family, our best moments have always been outdoors. As a Canadian, we treasure all our seasonal exploits, watching our budding skiers snow-plow, getting that morning sunrise after a long hike, and our summers on the lake. We value our environment and the future it offers our children. Therefore, the warning of “Code Red for Humanity” issued last year sent a shiver down my spine. Climate scientists have been warning the world regarding global warming and the potential irreversible changes that could follow. Despite multiple warnings, many industries are still unregulated regarding carbon dioxide emissions and their effects on climate. One such industry is healthcare where our chosen profession contributes 10% of total greenhouse emissions in the US and 4% in Canadian healthcare systems.

At home, most of us recycle, compost and try to reduce the most wasteful aspects of day-to-day life such as plastic bags, plastic plates and all that endless packaging. However, home is only part of our life’s picture. As physicians specializing in Anesthesia, we generate multiple times more carbon dioxide emissions at work than

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M. L. Ma  
Department of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine, University of Alberta Hospital,  
Edmonton, AB, Canada

V. Ip (✉)  
Department of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine, University of Alberta Hospital, Edmonton,  
AB, Canada  
e-mail: [hip@ualberta.ca](mailto:hip@ualberta.ca)

the average person. This is because the volatile agents used in a general anesthetic are potent greenhouse gases. This means that in an average 7-h work day, the carbon dioxide emitted will be equivalent to driving from New York to west Ohio and this is practicing in an environmentally conscious way. However, despite the majority of Anesthetists choosing the more sustainable volatile agent, some may still choose a volatile agent that is more environmentally harmful. By choosing this less sustainable volatile agent, an average 7-h work day would be equivalent to having driven from New York to San Francisco three times! The most frustrating thing for me is that the choice does not impact patient care at all.

My career is a principal part of who I am. The ability to incorporate something so close to your heart, impact real change and make improvements through your job is, to me, the definition of fulfilment. As healthcare professionals, we attain a great level of achievement and gratification striving for improvement. Through colleagues and the literature, I am constantly learning about how my job affects the environment and I realize how much can be done. This process includes using safer techniques, instituting better systems, and always learning and educating others. Being environmental stewards in anesthesiology, we embody this via the use of sustainable techniques such as regional anesthesia and total intravenous anesthesia. These anesthetic options reduce the use of inhaled anesthetic agents. We have also instituted systems in our departments that highlight sustainable practice such as upgrading to more efficient anaesthetic machines and opting for reusable equipment whenever possible.

Not only do I practice in an environmentally sustainable way, I also find myself compelled to spread the message. Unfortunately, there are still many who are unaware of environmental sustainability in healthcare. It is important to seize opportunities to educate, as knowledge is the key to enabling change. Empowering others to do the right thing means we are closer to slowing down climate change and farther away from the 'irreversible line'!

"Green Anesthesia" has gained momentum as climate change has increased awareness. As a result, the academic community has accepted the importance of increasing education in this field. This has been evidenced by higher numbers of journal publications and international guest speakers dedicated to this cause. Environmental stewards have a great opportunity to educate on a much larger platform with the added benefit of increased leadership roles and responsibilities. In fact, through dedicated work with my colleagues I have had the honor of founding a special interest group within one of the largest anesthesia subspecialty societies, the American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine. From there, we also founded an Environmental Sustainability Section in the Canadian Anesthesia Society. One can gain a sense of peace, balance and fulfilment through engagement in environmental protection, improvements in medical practices for our greater society, and opportunities for simultaneous career progression.

Despite our best efforts, not everyone cares about the environment, and this can be quite disheartening. I am lucky to be surrounded by colleagues with similar values and aspirations. By working together and learning from each other, we have become good friends. Very often, when venting frustrations with this peer group, it

can facilitate high levels of creativity. These conversations can sometimes lead to great ideas and projects to work on which boost morale. To have a group of friends in the workplace with whom you can relate to and confide in helps keep me vitalized. A social support element at work is crucial for us to thrive and stay focused.

Most notably I have seen how important this topic is for the younger generations of healthcare professionals. They are all too familiar with the concerns of greenhouse gas emissions leading to global warming and the threat to healthcare and humanity as a whole. It is a wonderful opportunity to connect with like-minded physicians over something so important to us all. It enables exchanges of new ideas and collaboration with a fresh perspective and I have hope that we are building the groundwork for future generations.

Green Anesthesia is still evolving and relatively novel with an ongoing need for exploration and innovation. Applying these principles in the workplace has permeated all aspects of my clinical practice and even extends beyond the boundaries of the hospital. As such, it has led to a further engagement and zest for what I do day to day. I feel a sense of contentment knowing that I am able to push past my comfort zone and contribute in any way I can to the advancement of this important mindset. The foundation we set now will continue to develop and progress well after my colleagues and I have all retired. This meaningful impact, I know will help me rest easy when I have left the clinical setting.

Ultimately, I feel passionately that through environmental protection in healthcare, one can find fulfilment as well as achievement. We are all too aware of how necessary it is for us to do our part, for our next generation and the generation after. Dedicating myself to this field has been a worthy cause in more ways than I can highlight. From implementing sustainable clinical practices and education to career advancement, it has provided balance and peace at work and beyond.