



What practices can do

Tertiary care facilities generate the majority of emission and ecological footprint that arises from the health care system. However, private practices, both specialist and general practice, can still play a vital role in becoming more sustainable. Investing in sustainability may save money in the long term, but shouldn't be the only motivation for change. It is also important for doctors, with their respected positions in society, to show that caring for the environment is achievable without sacrificing quality of life. Maybe the quality of healthcare we deliver may even improve. Here are some tips that many of us may consider, or do more of.



GO SOLAR

A medical practice is well suited to using solar power because the peak demand is during the day when the sun is shining. Even if you don't own your own building, it is worth discussing this option with your landlord. The cost and embedded energy of the panels will be recouped in a number of years, then large savings will accrue from reduced energy bills.



MANAGE WASTE

Waste separation is important because infectious waste is around 10 times more expensive to dispose of than general waste and it's a more energy-intensive process. If they don't come into contact with patients, these items are clean and recyclable. Additionally, other wastes such as paper used on day beds, if clean, can be recycled as paper waste rather than general waste, or clinical or medical waste. Buy consumables in bulk to reduce packing waste. Maybe it is even time to reconsider the true lifecycle cost of disposables, such as speculums, and keeping the steriliser in use.



RECYCLE

Recycling will only happen if supported by the availability of suitable bins and culture in the practice. Some practices have a paper recycling container in every consulting room and a general recycling bin in the tea room. Even a compost bin could be considered if you have any keen gardeners in your practice.



ENERGY EFFICIENT DESIGN

Buildings can be retrofitted with energy efficient LED lighting, and shading of external walls and windows, particularly west facing, will produce significant energy savings. Ensure that heating and cooling is not operating in empty rooms or overnight, and establish practice habits for computers to be turned off at the end of each working day.



REDUCE PAPER

Computers were supposed to facilitate the paperless office, but many practices still print off paper copies and rely on scanning and faxing. Efforts to reduce paper will speed up the transition to secure electronic referrals and access to results, but new systems need commitment to learn and adopt to the technology. If you do need to use paper, at least insist on using recycled paper, which is affordable and of good quality now.



CHOOSE WISELY

Medical imaging and pharmaceuticals carry a large ecological footprint. Avoiding unnecessary tests and treatments can therefore have multiple benefits in reducing harms and healthcare costs, but also being more sustainable for our planet.

ONSLOW ROAD FAMILY PRACTICE, PERTH

Ten years ago, Dr George Crisp wanted to show that having a sustainable practice can be done easily and would encourage patients to follow suit. He also wanted to show his patients how it could benefit their health. They started with a leaflet detailing the things that patients could do for their health that were also environmentally beneficial – for example, cycling to work instead of driving, and eating less processed foods, as well as opting for local and fresh foods.

The practice uses recycled paper, switched to energy-saving bulbs and installed bike racks and shower facilities to encourage staff to cycle or walk to work. There's a vegetable and fruit garden and staff encourage children from the school across the road to harvest the produce. Patients and neighbours can bring food scraps in for the practice's composting bins. It took three and half years to pay off new solar panels, after which they started saving \$1,275 a year.



DR DAVID KING
Academic GP, University of Queensland and Immediate Past Chair of the Queensland Committee of Doctors for the Environment Australia.

THRIVE MEDICAL CAIRNS

General practice Thrive Medical started in April 2016 in Cairns North. The practice operates from a 70-year-old rented house. They made some energy efficient renovations prior to opening – insulation, reflective coatings on the windows and solar panels. They also invested in quality furniture and equipment to last for many years.

Nowadays, the practice makes a big effort to minimise paper use. To do this, they send referrals via secure messaging. They otherwise send and receive faxes electronically. Thrive Medical are auditing all incoming paper and advertising materials. They also reduce waste by sterilising instruments and separate paper kitchen and treatment room waste for recycling.

In the future, they hope to add more solar panels, purchase a solar battery storage system, plant some fruit trees out the back, install a bike rack for patient use and purchasing reusable speculums.

"At our practice we are all very concerned about the future of our planet. We feel strongly that the medical profession has a responsibility to be leaders in the changes needed to protect our environment and our future. We also recognise that the changes we have made in this regard personally and professionally have improved our health and well-being and we are keen to share this with our patients and colleagues. Beyond this, there is absolutely clear business sense in making these changes - we have saved a significant amount of money!" Dr Jane Barry, Thrive Medical



HEALTH HUB MORAYFIELD

When work started on the \$100 million, 14,000sqm Morayfield Health Hub in 2017, the Health Developments Corporation wanted to include a broader sustainability program. The hub was built on an old Bunnings building and they used what they could from the old building.

The biggest green initiative for the site, though, is the 404kW solar power system, which will achieve payback in

just over four years from installation, saving the group \$123,000 in energy bills each year.

"Health and climate change are so inextricably linked we wanted to make sure for this building we were actually able to have a sustainable model around what we were doing in terms of energy consumption," said Director Dr Evan Jones.

"As the prices of batteries come down

and it makes economic sense, we'll put in a battery system which will provide us with a very large uninterruptible power supply (UPS) that will be able to manage some of our power supplies through the night then," said Dr Jones.

Beyond solar energy, Morayfield Health Hub has a broader sustainability program incorporating elements such as LED lighting, rainwater tanks and two electric vehicle chargers.

