



AS an RN, Susan Yates is well aware of the cumulative effects that environmental factors can have on one's health. But she never voiced her opinions in public until RNAO's policy department approached her for help. It was the fall of 2009 and Yates, president of the Wellington chapter, was asked to represent the association at a stakeholder consultation on toxics. The Ministry of the Environment had chosen Guelph as one of five communities to provide input on a policy proposal for Ontario's *Toxics Reduction Strategy*.

"Kim Jarvi, RNAO's senior economist and expert on environmental issues, provided me with great information and coached me," says Yates, who spent hours reviewing policy materials before the meeting. She admits that while she felt well-prepared, she worried that she would be out of her league in a room full of experts. When she discovered she was one of only two guests representing the health concerns of the public, and discussing illnesses and diseases caused by hazardous emissions, she found the confidence she needed.

"I stood up and asked: 'What about people? What about the community? I understand the bottom line, but we need to do the right thing and the right thing is protecting the health and



OUR HEALTH, AND THE HEALTH OF THE PLANET

Why advocating for a cleaner, greener environment is a top priority for nurses and RNAO.

BY JILL-MARIE
BURKE

well-being of the environment and the people who are breathing the air you're talking about.”

As she spoke, Yates felt she was getting through to the manufacturers and engineers in the crowd. “I got a sense that they started feeling a little ashamed. They were concerned that complying with stricter regulations would impact their production costs and profit margins, but they realized there has to be some sort of compromise. I had the impression that the other health representative and I became the conscience (in the room),” she says.

Almost 10,000 deaths each year in Ontario are attributable to a limited number of air pollutants. That's according to the Ontario Medical Association, which also says the province's health costs associated with these pollutants exceeds \$8 billion annually.

The evidence linking environmental factors to health is so strong that advocating for a cleaner, greener environment is one of RNAO's top priorities. *Creating Vibrant Communities*, the association's platform for the 2011 provincial election, outlines recommendations related to greenhouse gas emissions, coal and nuclear power, toxics, pesticides, clean water and public transportation. Nurses know that a person's ability to be healthy is directly related to their environment and that fewer pollutants and toxics

in the atmosphere will mean fewer cases of asthma, lung cancer, cardiovascular disease and allergies.

Environmental issues have been a priority for RNAO from as far back as 2000, when a resolution to the board of directors called on the association to support campaigns to ban the cosmetic use of pesticides. Nurses began lobbying with the Partnership for Pesticide Bylaws, a group of 14 community organizations. The association also joined a coalition of health and environmental organizations, led by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), to launch an anti-pesticide ad campaign in 2005. By 2008, following demands from the coalition, *Bill 64*, provincial legislation to ban the use and sale of pesticides for cosmetic purposes, was passed.

RNAO has also collaborated with CAPE and the Ontario Clean Air Alliance to advocate for the closure of all coal-fired generating units ahead of the announced 2014 deadline. At a joint news conference in April 2010, Wendy Fucile, RNAO Past President, revealed that pollution from coal plants kills more than 300 people each year in Ontario. She added that getting rid of toxins associated with coal production would also reduce the estimated 100,000 asthma attacks and other illnesses that Ontarians suffer

annually. Six months after that press conference, Energy Minister Brad Duguid took an important step in the right direction when he announced the immediate closure of four coal-fired generating units, and singled out RNAO for its role in advocating for change.

Thousands of RNAO members have been inspired by these success stories, and have shown their commitment to environmental issues by forwarding action alerts to colleagues, friends and family members. Others have taken their activism to the next level by: leading or participating in community based environmental campaigns; inspiring students to get involved; or researching environmental issues for master's or doctoral work.

RNAO, meanwhile, continues to advocate for the environment. In fact, the association recently welcomed a new interest group, Ontario Nurses for the Environment (ONEIG). "Our focus is on empowering nurses to improve environmental health," says co-chair Chris Kells, adding that she wants to educate members about issues such as climate change, greening health care, air and water pollution, and reducing waste and exposure to toxins. ONEIG members will also advocate for environmental policies aimed at disease prevention. Kells

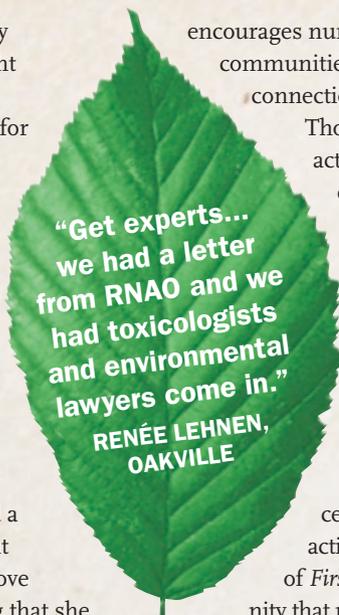
encourages nurses who are working on issues in their own communities to join ONEIG. "We can provide resources, connections and support."

Those who want to take their environmental activism to the next level can also look to researchers for inspiration. Pembroke RN Kelly

O'Grady has been studying toxins for over a decade, and is considered an authority on the issue. Her initial motivation to become involved in activism was personal, but her interest in researching lead poisoning has since become a professional passion.

In 1996, when she was renovating her home, O'Grady read a small article in the *Ottawa Citizen* about lead poisoning. Concerned about the health of her family, she took action. Fifteen years later, she is executive director of *First Six Years*, a volunteer group in her community that raises awareness about the harmful effects lead and other toxins can have on a small child's health. In January, she completed her master's in Nursing Science at the University of Ottawa with a focus on the federal government's response to childhood lead poisoning.

(Continued on page 16)



ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM STARTS AT SCHOOL

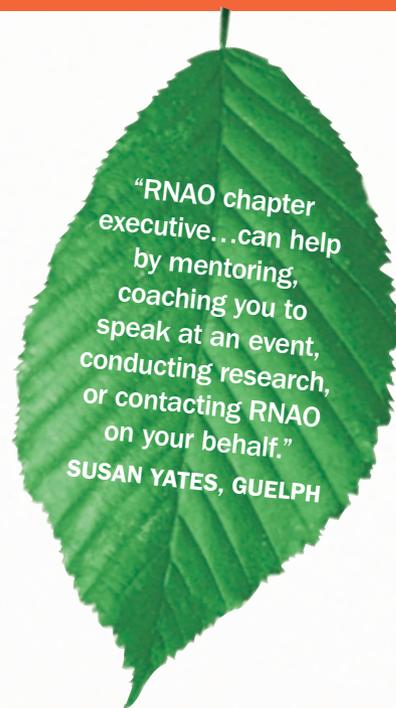
When Margot Rykhoff, a University of New Brunswick/Humber College nursing professor, learned that the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) wanted faculty to incorporate environmental health into the curriculum of undergraduate nursing programs, she took the recommendation seriously. In the fall of 2008, in a partnership with Della Faulkner, a nurse consultant in public policy at CNA, Rykhoff and her third-year students embarked on an environmental health project. The goal was to teach the group – who were studying community and population health – how to educate patients and other nursing students about environmental hazards, and to raise awareness of environmental issues across campus.

The class of eight produced and acted in a four-minute video, which included a nursing student teaching a pregnant woman about the dangers of environmental contaminants. They

also developed and implemented a college-wide environmental awareness program to promote green behaviour. They showed educational videos and hosted an interactive game (modeled after the popular Wheel of Fortune) in the student centre. It enabled participants to measure their carbon footprint. The group also created a poster campaign with slogans like *It makes sense to use less scents*, *Don't hesitate, separate* (to encourage recycling), and *Don't be a fool, carpool*.

Rykhoff says the project led to the creation of two green teams in the health sciences department – one led by students and the other by faculty – which continue to encourage the college community to change its habits.

They learned a lot from this project, Rykhoff says: "You could see throughout the term how the importance of environmental health became more evident to the students. They became environmental health champions." **RN**



SAFE DISPOSAL OF MEDS MEANS SAFER WATER SUPPLY

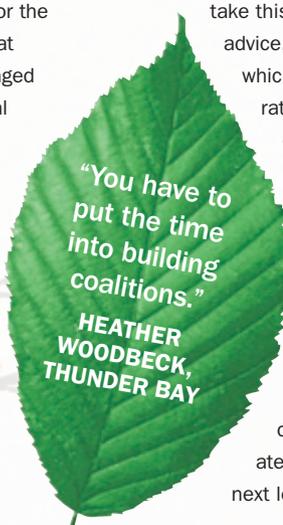
In 2010, students in a fourth-year professional issues course led by RN Kim English began exploring the safe disposal of pharmaceuticals from an environmental perspective. The Trent University nursing students found there was limited research available about best practices. They also discovered that since most people don't know how to properly dispose of medications, they are flushing them down the toilet, pouring them down the drain or putting them in the garbage. Sewage treatment plants and septic tanks aren't designed to remove pharmaceuticals, and the chemical components in medication become part of our water supply, sometimes leading to adverse health effects. As well, medicines that end up in landfill sites can leach into ground water.

Concerned about the environment and troubled by the lack of information available to

the public, the students approached a Port Hope pharmacist with a proposal to collaborate on a *Clean Out Your Medicine Cabinet Day*. The pharmacist agreed to participate and picked up the tab for the safe disposal of medications on that designated day. The students arranged for a free advertisement in the local newspaper and on the radio, and placed flyers in the pharmacy. They called on members of the community to drop off their unused medications, and they did. Even staff from a local long-term care home brought in their residents' unwanted prescriptions since they too were unsure what to do with them.

The students were pleased with the success of the campaign.

So was English. "I said to them 'there's a whole lot more you could do with this so why don't we look at pulling together a resolution and let's see if we can actually take this to RNAO.'" Following her advice, they created a resolution which called on RNAO to collaborate with pharmacists and other health-care providers to actively promote the safe disposal of pharmaceuticals. It was passed unanimously. "They didn't have to do that," English says. "They had already completed the requirements for the course, but they felt passionate about taking it to the next level." **RN**



"You have to put the time into building coalitions."
HEATHER WOODBECK,
THUNDER BAY

TOXICS

Chronic conditions (asthma, cancer, developmental disabilities, birth defects) have become the primary cause of illness and death of children in industrialized countries, and there is growing expert recognition that chemicals in the environment are partly responsible for these trends.

In 2007, the Liberal government promised to force companies to reduce toxics emissions. The *Toxics Reduction Act (TRA)* passed June 5, 2009 but lacks reduction targets, mandatory substitution of safer substances and an independent toxics use reduction institute. RNAO is pushing for stronger regulations and to speed up implementation of the *Act*.

CLIMATE CHANGE, COAL-FIRED ENERGY

According to the Ontario Clean Air Alliance, pollution from coal-fired generators killed over 300 people last year in Ontario. Closing coal plants will not only save lives, but will represent the largest single reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the primary cause of climate change in North America.

The government's 2007 *Climate Change Action Plan* recommends that Ontario reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 6 per cent below 1990 levels by 2014, 15 per cent by 2020, and 80 per cent by 2050. RNAO wants to see a 25 per cent reduction by 2020 and closure of all remaining coal plants by 2012.

LOCAL EFFORTS HELP PAVE THE WAY TO PROVINCIAL BYLAW

In 2004, Toronto became the largest city in North America to introduce legislation banning the cosmetic use of pesticides. Four years later, the Ontario government passed *Bill 64*, legislation that banned the sale and use of cosmetic pesticides across the province. Thunder Bay nurse practitioner Ann McGoey has always believed that if pesticides kill dandelions and bugs, they can't be good for humans. "We are exposed to a chemical soup just eating, breathing and living in our world," she says. "In Northwestern Ontario, we have higher rates of cancer and you wonder: 'Is it the mills? Is it something in the water that's causing this?'"

Ten years ago, McGoey was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, a rare cancer affecting the immune system. She believes there is an environmental link.

McGoey fought cancer for four years before

taking early retirement in 2001. But she wasn't done fighting. In fact, she announced at her retirement party that she would lobby to have cosmetic pesticides banned in her community. She wanted to help prevent others – especially children – from getting sick.

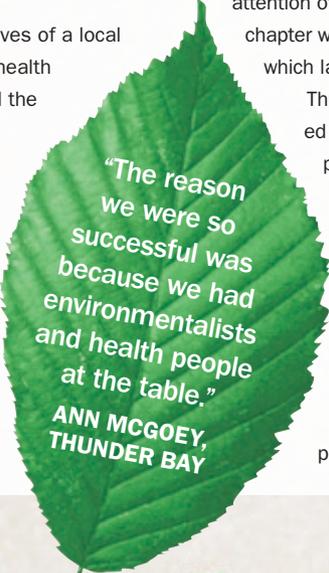
She invited representatives of a local environmental group, the health unit, the cancer clinic, and the university to a meeting at her dining room table. "They were keen and we were very focused," she remembers.

The group lobbied government, held public information sessions at the library about how to have a healthy lawn without

pesticides, staffed booths at public events, and distributed lawn signs that said *Proudly Pesticide-Free*. They monitored municipal council meetings and whenever a topic like parks was on the agenda, McGoey sent information on bright yellow paper to get the attention of councillors. RNAO's Lakehead chapter was also involved in the campaign, which lasted more than four years.

Thunder Bay's bylaw was superseded by the sweeping legislation passed by the province in 2008.

"That was okay," McGoey says without even a hint of remorse. "I felt that we helped with the groundswell for the provincial legislation." She's thankful to have contributed to the effort, she says. "This was a great way to experience changing policy for public health." **RN**



"The reason we were so successful was because we had environmentalists and health people at the table."
ANN MCGOEY,
THUNDER BAY

(Continued from page 14)

O'Grady suggests that media attention on lead in children's toys has led to increased public awareness of the issue. However, lead found in house paint is a much more prevalent and serious health concern. "Believe it or not, Health Canada did not actually ban lead in paint until 2005," she says. Children living in older homes and homes undergoing renovations can ingest lead paint that has been ground into dust. It's one of the most predominant toxins in our midst."

Through her research, O'Grady discovered that in the first six years of life, when the brain is developing, lead gets stored in the brain and wreaks havoc on nervous system development. She says very little research has been done to identify how many children are affected in Canada, but research in other countries shows that children who are poisoned by lead are seven times more likely not to complete high school and are more likely to have behavioural problems and learning difficulties.

O'Grady is a case manager at a Pembroke Community Care Access Centre. "We have children who come in with speech deficits or who may be lagging behind developmentally. I think we should be going into their homes and looking for environmental causes," she says.

For O'Grady, Yates, and members of ONEIG, preventing disease and protecting the health of family members, clients and communities motivates them to advocate for change. "They've told us the issues that are important to them. They've offered up advice for others who are ready to wade into the waters of environmental activism," says Rob Milling, Director of Health and Nursing Policy at RNAO. He adds that in many cases, nurses approach RNAO about an issue in their own communities even before that issue has been taken up by the association. "They've shown us that advocating for environmental change can be overwhelming at first, but that the actions of individuals can change opinions." **RN**

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The stories featured here may inspire you to tackle an environmental issue in your workplace or community, or may prompt you to get involved at the local, provincial or national level. If you do, let us know what you're up to, and how you think your work will help to save our planet. Send details of your experiences to editor@rnao.org.