



Environmental determinants of health

RNAO Vision backgrounder

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Nurses know environmental determinants of health play a huge role in each community's overall health and well-being, as evidenced in Ontario^{1 2 3 4} and around the world.^{5 6 7 8} Environmental degradation and climate change are not vague future threats, but actual realities that are having and impact on the health Ontarians. For example, the Ontario Medical Association estimated that Ontario suffered about 9,500 premature deaths due to smog in 2008,⁹ while the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated its figure to be 200,000 due to particulate matter alone.¹⁰ It is much healthier and more cost effective to prevent pollution: the EPA estimated that the benefits of its Clean Air Act alone to outweigh costs by a factor of 30 to one.¹¹ Access to clean air, a safe environment, and reliable and sustainable forms of electricity help preserve our planet and secure the future for our children. That's why RNAO continues to focus on strengthening two key environmental determinants of health: supporting the use of green energy and reducing all exposure to toxics, including from the environment, in homes, in workplaces and in consumer products.

Toxics - New toxics are being discovered and released on a regular basis, and the public is often unaware of their presence or effects. Concern has been growing about a worrisome class of toxics called endocrine disruptors. These particular toxics can cause serious health effects, even in very low concentrations and particularly in young children.^{12 13 14 15 16 17} The range of effects are not fully understood, but based on what is known, RNAO calls for extreme caution and tougher protection from the government on toxics by:

- Protecting the public's right-to-know about toxics in their environment, homes, workplaces and consumer products, and taking concrete action on issues such as product labelling.
- Committing to aggressive targets for reductions in the use, creation and release of toxics.
- Requiring mandatory substitution of safer alternatives for toxic substances in production processes.
- Establishing an independent academic institute to build capacity for meeting above requirements.

At this point, Ontario's Toxics Reduction Act lacks targets, enforcement, mandatory substitution and an independent academic institute. We urge the government to fix these gaps, which greatly weaken the effectiveness of the Act. We also urge the government to use whatever other opportunities to present themselves to reduce Ontarians' exposure to toxics, such as including toxics reduction targets in pending legislation like the Great Lakes Protection Act (Bill 6).

Green energy - RNAO strongly supports an electricity system that is safe, reliable, equitable and environmentally sustainable; one that supports community-sustaining green jobs, and one that does not pollute the air or leave a legacy of toxic waste and bankrupt Ontario residents and businesses.¹⁸ In a very significant move, on November 21, 2013, the Premier announced that the government planned to ban the use of coal for electricity production after December 31, 2014.^{19 20} RNAO's vision of a clean, healthy energy future is balanced and comprehensive.

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