

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Eco-Remedies for Our Health Care Crisis

Dear EcoGirl: The health care crisis is such a timely topic right now. Can an environmental perspective help provide solutions? *Signed, A Health Advocate*

Dear Health Advocate: Ah, what a great question. Yes, I've been amazed that, amidst all the fierce health care debates, the environmental dimension is still largely being ignored, even given the clear connections between our high illness rates and exposure to environmental pollutants and everyday toxics.

Unfortunately, I feel that neglecting this issue has been a key reason that illness and medical costs have been escalating beyond what our culture can afford. However, addressing this harm can help us produce our much-needed breakthroughs in reducing both illness and health care expenses.

The Vital Link Between the Environment & Our Health

A key remedy then is for our mainstream health care system to embrace, in both policy and patient care, these essential truths connecting the environment and our shared health.

1) The environment is not “out there” but intimate with our bodies. It's the water we drink, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the products we buy, and the surfaces we touch everywhere in our lives. All the toxics and pollutants that our culture produces travel around the globe, harming people and the planet along the way — including us.

2) Humanity's pollutants are consistently found in everyone's bodies, no matter how clean our lifestyle. Did we really imagine that we could pollute the earth and not poison ourselves?

3) Everyday toxics are contributing significantly to high rates of common diseases. A study by Safer Chemicals Healthy Families (SCHF, www.saferchemicals.org) estimates that toxic chemicals cause 30% of child-

hood asthma cases, 10% of diabetes and Parkinson's disease, and 5% of childhood cancer. Chronic diseases such as these affect half our population, generating 75% of health care costs and 70% of deaths.

4) Modest changes could drastically cut illness and costs. The Milken Institute estimates that small environmental and behavioral changes could cut 40 million chronic illness cases by 2023. SCHF calculates that trimming just 0.1% from medical costs would save \$5 billion a year. Pam Palitz of Environment California says, “Good chemical reform policy is good fiscal policy. We literally cannot afford the status quo when it comes to toxic chemical exposure.”

True Prevention

When today's medical system talks about prevention, it usually just means early detection. However, health professionals and individuals can help millions of people actually avoid disease by taking committed action towards these three key eco-objectives.

1) Drastically reduce our individual and shared exposure to toxics and pollutants. There are many effective (and often cheaper) ways to meet our needs at home, work, and play, without poisoning ourselves, our families, other creatures, and water supplies. (See my past columns for tips plus Health Care Without Harm, www.noharm.org.)

It's also important to take community level action, such as improving toxics laws (see my Nov. 2009 column), encouraging cleaner manufacturing and energy production (including phasing out coal and nuclear power), and supporting health groups that address environmental factors (such as Breast Cancer Action, www.bcaction.org).

2) Prioritize an eco-healthy diet, both in our lives and our hospitals (please!). Much of what nurtures a

healthy environment also nourishes individual health, including eating fresh whole foods, low on the food chain, and organic. Most mainstream food has been depleted and polluted by toxic farming practices. Studies show that choosing organic notably reduces dietary and environmental toxics, increases nutrients, and encourages less-toxic agriculture.

3) Integrate earth-friendly traditional healing as an equal partner. A wide variety of traditional natural modalities have been proven over generations to skillfully assess and adjust body imbalances early, with little or no side effects to ourselves or the planet. This gracefully maintains our wellness at a much lower cost, while avoiding pharmaceuticals' harm to our environment and water supplies. For more about integrating Western and traditional approaches, plus other key system reforms, see Dr. Weil's book *Why Our Health Matters*.

I hope that these ideas inspire you to help heal our medical system by reweaving it with the earth again.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see “Ask EcoGirl” on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. “EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone.”

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