Greening Pharmacy – good for the planet, good for our health and good for the bottom line

Judith Singleton 2013

In its report for World Health Day 2008 entitled ‘Protecting Health from Climate Change’, the World Health Organisation urged health sectors to lead by example in undertaking sustainability initiatives to protect people from the effects of climate change (World Health Organisation, 2008). This report suggested actions which included ensuring that the health sector was involved in key policy making around sustainable development, and also, that it should work towards reducing its carbon footprint through better management of energy use, transport and procurement. However, healthcare professionals need to understand the negative effects on health of unsustainable development in order to accept that they need to change the way they deliver healthcare services and the imperative for this change. Unsustainable development has led to an increase in negative effects on population health including cardiovascular morbidities (extreme heat events), respiratory diseases (airborne pollutants), increases in the transmission of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, and mental health disorders through population displacement from droughts or floods. Changing to sustainable business practices will not only have beneficial co-benefits to public health but also on profitability.

In recent years, many companies around the world have found that commitment to sustainability can improve the bottom line (Brodwin, 2013; Haanaes, Michael, Jurgens, & Rangan, 2013). Brodwin (2013) cites two sustainable business models which have been proven to work both in the USA and other developed countries. One of these models targets health-conscious customers who prefer to pay more for a product that is organic, and has been produced in a sustainable way (safe for the environment and socially responsible in looking after workers involved in production). A second model described by Brodwin is where companies drive down costs through changes to organisational processes and building design that are more sustainable and resource efficient (energy and water reductions, recycling etc) and sometimes leading to the production of products or services that are superior in quality. A report produced by sustainability experts at Boston Consulting Group, World Economic Forum and Insead (Haanaes et al., 2013) and published in the
Harvard Business Review in March 2013 demonstrated the link between sustainable business practices and superior growth and increased profitability. The authors conducted a review of sustainability practices in more than 1,000 companies in developing countries around the globe and found that companies that followed sustainable practices in their operations “consistently delivered superior growth rates and margins when compared to their non-sustainable peers” (Brodwin, 2013; Haanaes et al., 2013). Many of these companies worked actively with their customers thereby creating interdependencies that were hard for competitors to imitate.

**The Case for Greening Pharmacy**

As pharmacists we should be genuinely concerned about the impact of pharmaceuticals on the environment. The production of pharmaceuticals consumes large amounts of energy, water and other resources and their consumption leads to large volumes of solid waste in the form of packaging. Since the 1990’s there has also been increasing public concern over the presence of pharmaceuticals in drinking water. Even though these levels are not high enough to affect human health, they are still an environmental concern (Kummerer & Hempel, 2010). Since pharmacies are part of the pharmaceutical supply chain from drug companies to patients, pharmacists have a role to play in determining how pharmacies and the pharmaceutical industry can become more sustainable.

Not only will greening pharmacy benefit the environment, it will also have co-benefits for the public’s health (which aligns with the recommendation of the National Preventative Health Taskforce that Australia needs to change its health focus from one of ‘illness’ to ‘wellness’ (National Health Reform Commission, 2009)) and importantly for pharmacy owners, it can also increase profitability. However, true greening of pharmacy involves more than a sustainability statement on the pharmacy’s website describing the recycling of medicine bottles or the use of recycled paper – this is little more than ‘green washing’ and a cynical public will see through it immediately. Pharmacy needs to go much further and embrace sustainability in the true sense of the word and it looks as though Walgreens in the USA are leading the charge. On March 7th this year, Walgreens announced plans to build what it believes to be America’s first net zero energy retail pharmacy with engineers
predicting that the store will produce energy equal to, or greater than, it consumes. This will be achieved through the use of solar panels, wind turbines, geothermal technology, energy efficient building materials, LED lighting and ultra-high-efficiency refrigeration. Walgreens is also committed to a chain-wide energy reduction of 20% by 2020. Energy reduction is a great start towards building a truly sustainable pharmacy business and will generate significant cost savings as well. It will be interesting to see if in the future Walgreens also looks to introduce sustainable practices into other areas of its business.

**Conclusion**

Today’s business environment is changing to one of finite and increasingly scarce resources – we have reached the point where we will have to consider not only the return on assets and equity but also the return on resources used. As Haanaes et al (2013) succinctly put it, “Companies that fail to calculate this equation will find themselves at the mercy of price increases and volatility, regulation, and social pressures, while those that master it will enjoy competitive advantage and gain market share.” Changing community pharmacies to sustainable businesses is not just about short-term strategies such as minimising environmental impact (which is mitigating climate change, a by-product of unsustainable development) but also about long-term strategies - strategies that will transition them to truly sustainable enterprises. This will involve education and organisational change management – making people realise they have to change their home and work practices for the future of the planet and embedding sustainability in organisational systems and processes. We cannot continue to live as we have been and hope that technology will find a way of reducing the carbon footprint sufficiently to mitigate climate change without much change in our lifestyles - at work and at leisure. Greening pharmacy is the way of the future – it’s good for the planet, good for our health and good for the bottom line.

**References**


World Health Organisation. (2008). *Healthy Hospitals, Healthy Planet, Healthy People: Addressing Climate Change in Healthcare Settings (Discussion Draft).*