

BUSINESS IN PRACTICE

Practices going green

SUSTAINABILITY Stephen Mahony, APAM, who runs Teneriffe Physio in Brisbane, and Tom McMillan, FACP, who directs Physio Plus Group in eight locations, are both dedicated to environmentally sustainable business practices. Skye Mitchell reports.

Stephen Mahony decided over 10 years ago that he had a social responsibility to try to make changes so that he could make as little impact on the environment as possible.

He was inspired to commit to change after he sat in the audience of an ABC program that featured a panel of guests, including politicians and scientists, discussing climate change and the Kyoto Protocol. Stephen did not want to wait for politicians to implement policies on climate change, and the use of renewable energy in particular. 'I thought that we were wasting time waiting for governments to do anything significant about renewable energy implementation,' he says.

Stephen decided that he was going to do something about it in his own physiotherapy practice and currently runs on 100 per cent green power. Although green power comes with a 5.1c/kWh surcharge, it means that every bit of power used in the practice comes from a renewable energy source. Stephen looked at getting solar panels but because he did not own the building, it was not a possibility. Green power was a more practical way for the practice to look at how they were using energy and how it may fit into the bigger picture. 'Purchasing green power energy means that there is funding coming through to the energy company to make further investment in this.'

'I think the other thing is, the more you are paying for something, the more careful you are about how you use it as well. If you have to commit to paying that extra for your power then it does also commit you to have a look at how you're using your power, and seeing what you can do to reduce your use,' he says.

Because Stephen's practice is situated in Queensland, a major part of his power use is air conditioning. Stephen and his team reduce their power use simply by leaving the air conditioning remote on the front desk where it is in front of the administration staff and they change it easily through the day. 'We make changes to the air con temperature setting just to keep the place comfortable, but not unnecessarily cold in summer, and the same for the heating in winter. Even during the lunch break when I might be there by myself doing some admin, I just turn it off for an hour. Prudent use of the air conditioner is important,' he says.

The practice is running wholly on sustainable power sources, but Stephen and his staff are still mindful about their use of power and other actions they can take. They make sure to turn everything off at the switch at night, and only use the minimum amount of lighting in the practice at any given time. No plastic cups are used and there are cardboard bales to make recycling easy. Environmentally friendly cleaning products are used and they do not need to use electric dryers because they launder at home and line dry.

Stephen says he feels that it is his 'social responsibility' to implement these small changes and make them a part of the culture. 'If you try the easy things that make the most difference in the first place, that is a good place to start. For us, that was the green power.'

There are significant impacts on healthcare from climate change, both short-term and long-term. 'There is a certain responsibility being health practitioners as well and you can start by attempting to make as little impact on the environment as possible.'

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Tom McMillan has made it his business to adopt goals from the Health Care Without Harm organisation and work towards becoming an environmentally friendly practice.

In 2009, a collaboration between *The Lancet* and University College London Institute for Global Health Commission climate change was said to be the 'biggest global health threat of the 21st century.' Tom believes it is important to work towards a sustainable business because climate change is damaging human health today and will have a greater impact in the future. 'I believe that the health sector, and physiotherapy, need to play a leadership role in addressing climate change. The health sector must use its significant economic, political and moral force to lead climate action in our society.'

Tom has made big changes across his clinics including redesigning spaces to replace inefficient heating and cooling systems, maximising natural light and installing LED lighting. 'The most environmentally friendly path is not always the least expensive financially, but we know it is the best way forward for the health sector. We believe health needs to lead the transformation to a healthy future for people and for the planet,' he says.

'We have implemented energy efficiency across our clinics including sensor and timed lighting, and efficient computers. We have also adopted renewable energy with a massive solar power system which produces over 25MWh each year.' Other environmental considerations involve purchasing local food, promoting minimal waste, eliminating harmful chemicals and reducing the amount of water use. Tom hopes to implement the use of grey water in future.

'Promoting our environmentally friendly practices sets a business from competitors and other professions. Providing a "green" clinic gives your patients another reason to "Choose Physio",' he says. 'Becoming less dependent on natural resources than your competitors and having ways to deal with rising costs due to climate change will give your business a greater chance of long term success.'

Tom recommends that other practice owners make an environmental sustainability strategy for their own business. 'Start by considering the environment in all your business decisions and then note down some goals for the short, medium and long-term,' he says.

'Our journey is not over. I see this as an ongoing practice for Physio Plus Group, and if we continue to look at our practices with an eco-friendly mindset, we will continue to find opportunities to improve.'

Business brief

Q&A with Founder of Climate and Health Alliance, Fiona Armstrong.



How does climate change affect the healthcare sector?

Climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, such as severe storms/floods, droughts, bushfires, and heatwaves. Warmer temperatures also contribute to an increase in air pollution and aeroallergens, leading to, for example, events such as thunderstorm asthma in 2016. It increases the risk of vector-borne diseases (via mosquitoes), such as Ross River virus. Due to changes in weather, impacts on ecosystems and subsequent impacts on social systems, a complex mix of adverse health effects arise, making it a key issue for the health sector.

How does small business fit in to this?

Everybody fits in to this. Climate change affects everyone, so it is everybody's responsibility to respond. Private practices possess the opportunity, the capacity and the flexibility in lots of ways to make changes that are harder in big institutions. I encourage all private practice physiotherapists and members of the APA to do what they can to green their practices. The benefits available not only improve their bottom line, but they will also improve the health of the patients.

What is the 2020 Healthcare Climate Challenge?

The 2020 Healthcare Climate Challenge is a part of an initiative of the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals Network (GGHH). The intention is to encourage hospitals and health services to raise their level of ambition and commit to their own emissions reduction targets. The GGHH is free to join and, as members, you can access tools and resources that will help to reduce your environmental and carbon footprint, improve your own climate resilience and in so doing, help to improve public health.

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