

A very good iDEA: The inaugural gathering of the student division of Doctors for the Environment Australia

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Elizabeth completed a Science Degree and Masters in Public Health prior to starting Medicine. In 2009, she was the National Student Representative for DEA, an active member in the West Australian Student Environmental Network (WASEN), and a convener of iDEA. This year she is a Publications Officer for DEA students.

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Catriona completed a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science at the University of New South Wales prior to starting Medicine. In 2009 Catriona was the NSW student representative for the DEA students and she continues this role in 2010.

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Imogen is a past student union environment officer at the University of Melbourne. In 2009 she was involved in starting the University of Melbourne Green Health Group, as well as being a convener of iDEA, a Victorian State Representative for DEA students and an Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) representative. She is currently the National Project Officer for DEA students.

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Sophie completed a Bachelor of Arts (Languages) at the University of Sydney prior to starting Medicine. In 2009 she helped start the University of Melbourne Green Health Group, was a State Representative for DEA students and one of the conveners of iDEA. This year Sophie is the DEA International and NGO Liaison Officer for DEA students.

James Correy

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James is an active member of local grassroots climate action groups in Hobart and has been influential in establishing an eco-health discussion and social group amongst medical students at his university. This year he is one of the two Publications Officers for DEA students.

In early December 2009, just prior to the much-hyped COP15 round of United Nations climate negotiations in Copenhagen, 40 medical students, representing six states and eleven medical schools, descended upon Melbourne for iDEA, the inaugural gathering for the student division of Doctors for the Environment (DEA). Attendees were encouraged to be mindful of their carbon footprints whilst travelling to the conference, with many students opting for train or coach rather than air travel. Most impressively, three Tasmanians cycled for three days from Hobart to Melbourne University (with the assistance of the Bass Strait ferry).

Education and networking were the focus of this three day gathering at Newman College within the University of Melbourne, where a plethora of distinguished speakers presented talks and interactive workshops to enlighten the receptive minds in attendance: academics, environmental activists, clinicians and all combinations of the three.

All present agreed that it was long overdue that medical students gathered to discuss environmental issues relevant to health; issues that for various reasons have been sidelined by the medical fraternity. These issues often traverse traditional subject boundaries, implying a perceived or real lack of academic expertise. Additionally, the lack of confidence in using one's 'authority' as a medical professional plays a part. Climate change, for instance, is often seen as a political or



The result of one attendee's bright iDEA.

economic concern rather than a threat to health. Being too busy, self-preservation, fear over allegations of hypocrisy, ignorance, inertia and 'donor fatigue' all contribute to the reluctance of doctors to speak up.

According to Costello *et al.*, climate change "is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century" and the repercussions to health will be global in reach, but with a disproportionately large impact falling on the developing world. [1] Matthew Wright, co-founder of Beyond Zero Emissions, a Melbourne-based organisation promoting the rapid transition to a zero carbon future, raised the interesting point that planning for a zero-carbon future is different to planning for a low emissions future, which, in turn, is different to planning for a doubtful emission reduction trading scheme in which concessions are made to big polluters. Although it seems paradoxical, government inaction in the short term could thus be preferable to legislating a hurried, binding scheme, that is in fact ineffectual in preventing an unsafe average global warming of two or more degrees.

Richard Di Natale, a former GP and Public Health physician, provided insight into how one might make the transition from clinician to environmental activist and politician. His non-linear career trajectory has seen him transition through positions in primary care, HIV programme development, Government Health Department bureaucracy and community-building. Most recently, he is persuading Victorian voters to give him the job of a Greens Senator at the next Federal election



Attendees with speakers Dr Forbes McGain (fourth from left) and Dr Peter Tait (fifth from left).

In keeping with the activism theme, Sea Shepherd crew member and physician-in-training Dr Merryn Redenbach opened discussion on how one might oscillate between being a Paediatric Registrar at the Royal Children's Hospital (Melbourne) and ship doctor for the marine wildlife conservation organisation. In her case, one of these roles obliged her to spend time in a Canadian prison cell; a notice, perhaps, for those who are also in the process of placing deontological conviction above personal comfort.

However, action, political or otherwise, is not always the consequence of a firmly held conviction. Taegan Edwards, a Research Fellow from the University of Melbourne, explored the issue in relation to climate change. Emotional responses to absorbing dire information, such as fear of impending climate-induced doom, were discussed along with typical responses and coping mechanisms. Comments from the audience floor indicated that she had touched on a common experience; often relating to the truisms that change of any kind is not often simple and being green is not frequently convenient.

Enormous difficulty is not always insurmountable, and truth and justice do sometimes prevail against all odds as speaker Bill Williams demonstrated. The GP and President of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW) reflected on his decade-long work as a campaigner for peace and nuclear disarmament. In the process, he managed to impart confidence in the delegates: things have and will continue to change for the better, particularly as long as those motivated by common good, rather than vested interests, find their voice and lead. His example provided a convincing case against leaving political engagement to professional lobbyists when it comes to issues that will truly shape our future.

Several speakers addressed the specifics of how the medical profession might choose to act on climate change. Colleen Hartland MLC, of the Victorian Greens, spoke about Melbourne's bushfire season and the prevalence and prevention of heat stress amongst the elderly. ANU academic Dr Colin Butler, co-founder and director of the Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight, discussed sustainability and global health, introducing the delegates to the primary, secondary and tertiary health effects of climate change and the complex interactions between them. Professor David Shearman, a physician and researcher from the University of Adelaide, led a roundtable forum on the potential for medical students to provide the necessary agitation for the medical establishment to embrace and normalise a new eco-health paradigm. Such a paradigm would place the natural world in its rightful place as not only a prerequisite resource for public physical health but as an end in itself of incalculable intrinsic worth. He conveyed that nature wears many hats - therapeutic and restorative, emotionally consoling, awe-inspiring, as well as providing a setting for physical exertion, food production, storage of drinking water and human settlement. Reflecting on how we can better interact within our ecosystem should be regarded as a central dilemma for the medical profession.

References

[1] Costello A, Abbas M, Allen A, Ball S, Bell S, Bellamy R *et al*. Managing the health effects of climate change. *Lancet* 2009;373(9676):1693-1733.



Attendees engaged in roundtable discussion.

Those whose actions are already making waves in the medical sector include Monash medical student and AMSA Thinktank member Michael Loftus, and Dr Forbes McGain, a consultant anaesthetist at the Western Hospital in Victoria. Michael spoke about AMSA Thinktank's recent Climate Code Green campaign, resources for which included a highly-acclaimed short video (that was scheduled to be screened at COP15) and an accompanying booklet on health and climate change. Such achievements by fellow medical students emphasised to attendees that it is possible to make an impact from a grass-roots level. Dr McGain spoke about his seminal research into 'green hospitals', the excessive waste and unsustainable use of resources within our health system and the many ways our hospitals can improve their green credentials without compromising infection control and health care.

All in all, iDEA was a wonderful opportunity to hear from academics and doctors whose daily work enables them to explore the relationship between health and the environment. Many difficult questions were raised; no easy solutions were found. Despite this, the delegates left confident that in time solutions will be created and embraced. Moreover, many came to the realisation that the health sector has an important role to play in this process. As a starting point, doctors and medical students can address the unsustainable aspects of our profession and generate awareness and knowledge about what our responsibilities and potential contributions are, both as individuals and as professionals. Without this, we will not be able to achieve the changes that are needed.

The closing event of the conference was the election of the 2010 DEA student committee and planning for the year's events. With a wealth of inspiration to draw on, and a strong commitment to reducing the adverse impact of climate change on health, 2010 promises to be an exciting year.

Correspondence

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