Many people associate going green with expensive organic products at the supermarket, but Ina Pockrass, co-founder of the Eco-Dentistry Association (EDA) suggests going green is as simple and inexpensive as rethinking.

The EDA has been busy since we last featured it in the October 2010 issue of Dentaltown Magazine. Since then it has created a program for certifying products and distributors as eco-friendly, in order to help dentists and patients make conscious decisions.

Ever wonder what is in the products you're buying? The EDA’s seal of approval helps you select products and equipment that will make the smallest impact on the environment. For instance, the association suggests an amalgam separator to prevent toxic mercury from entering the water supply. In 2012, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will require all practices to use amalgam separators (see sidebar). The EDA also suggests using stainless steel impression trays, so as to limit the waste coming from dental offices. A list of categories online provides a slew of resources for product buyers to buy smart!

The EDA has also launched a new Web site with a more robust platform for community development. In conjunction with its Web site, it has launched a blog called “The Green Zone (www.ecodentistryblog.com).” From industry news and how-to blurbs to weekly action items, this blog is teeming with ideas of how to make better choices for the office and the community.

GreenDOC, a new program for dentists to work toward greening their offices, launched in February 2010. The program provides opportunities for dental professionals to become authentically green and to stay authentically green. Pockrass explains it as an “objective third-party analysis of what dental professionals are doing to protect the environment and their practice.” Becoming a member is simple – read the member pledge and agree to abide by its precepts. Once you’re a member, you are eligible to participate in the GreenDOC program, and have access to the action plans, materials, initiatives and resources to get your office green certified.

EPA Document Excerpt

“...EPA expects to propose a rule next year and finalize it in 2012. Dental offices will be able to use existing technology to meet the proposed requirements. Amalgam separators can separate out 95 percent of the mercury normally discharged to the local waste treatment plant. The separator captures the mercury, which is then recycled and reused.

Until the rule is final, EPA encourages dental offices to voluntarily install amalgam separators. Twelve states and several municipalities already require the installation of amalgam separators in dental offices...”
Much like the LEED® certification, no one comes to inspect just how green your practice is (except patients, perhaps); rather, practices submit documentation and supporting materials which prove they have completed or have a plan to complete the various suggestions and requirements for getting the office certified as green. For example, in the category “Sustainable Location (Fig. 1a),” points are assigned to the various levels of sustainability. The highest point value goes to a dentist who practices in a LEED-certified building, the next highest value to a dentist who practices in an Energy Star-rated building. If these aren’t options for you, it doesn’t mean you can’t earn any points. GreenDOC likes to give dentists options! Maybe it is possible to locate an office in a multi-unit urban location. Can you position your office next to other amenities like a dry cleaners, gym or grocery store so patients can limit commute time while running errands? Maybe you are next to the subway, buses or campus shuttles? Do you provide parking for those who drive low-emissions vehicles to your practice? How about a place where those who ride their bike to their appointment can change? All of these things help make your practice green, and therefore all of them get you one step closer to a GreenDOC certification (Fig. 1b, see next page).

After all the worksheets are completed, the total point value places offices into one of three categories of certification – bronze, silver or gold. Dentists can choose from anywhere on the “green continuum” which shade of green they’d like their office to be. “It isn’t an all or nothing endeavor,” Pockrass says. “We call it the green continuum. We allow dentists across the board to work toward going green. We just want dentists to rethink.”

Rethinking involves asking yourself two questions: First, what are the easiest things I can do to prevent waste and be more...
environmentally conscious? And second, what are the most common ways in which my practice is wasteful?

Actions as simple as unplugging electronics before leaving the office can help prevent waste. “If you are the last person to leave the office, turn off anything with an on-off switch. It saves energy and money,” says Pockrass. Also, she encourages dentists to instruct patients to turn off the water when they brush their teeth. Each person who leaves the water on while brushing, wastes roughly 90 glasses of water per day. Another easy suggestion is to print on both sides of a piece of paper.

For the majority of dentists, infection control and sterilization are the most wasteful categories because most barriers are plastic and disposable. Pockrass suggests rather than covering the dental chair in a plastic bag for every patient, just wiping down the chair with an eco-friendly disinfectant. It’s effective, it saves money and it keeps paper and plastic out of the landfill.

There are two common misconceptions that surround the idea of being environmentally conscious within dentistry. One is the myth that reusable infection control methods are not sufficiently clean or safe. It is not difficult to find sterilization pouches that are FDA-registered reusable and barriers, which meet hospital-grade standards. In fact, 20 percent of hospitals in the U.S. use reusable sterilization and infection control methods. Another misconception is that buying green products is more expensive. But consider this, digital patient charting not only saves staff and doctor time but also saves 10,000 sheets of paper a year. Another example: the average conventional vacuum system in a dental office uses between 360 and 480 gallons of water a day, which is enough to fill a 28,000-gallon swimming pool four times in a year! DentalEZ and BaseVac both make waterless, oil-less systems. And, something as inexpensive as changing your light bulbs to energy-efficient fluorescents saves in excess of 2,500 kilowatts of energy per year, or an average of $400 annually.

“We [the EDA] don’t dictate the materials dentists can or can’t use,” Pockrass states, wanting every dentist to feel comfortable with the materials each use. “But we do ask whether the material is used responsibly,” she adds. She particularly warns about amalgam waste, as well as the lead foils and toxic chemicals involved in X-rays. There are ways to use your favorite methods and materials without being hurtful to the environment. Since amalgam contains harmful mercury, try an amalgam separator if you want to stick with this time-tested material (Fig. 1). And implement digital X-rays so you can ditch the chemicals and processing materials.

If you need a prep course before diving into greening your practice, take CE through the EDA site. “Green Dentistry 101” introduces the basics and provides definitions of terms and tips to start greening a practice. And a course on green infection control includes what ingredients to look for in products, and what to avoid. It also emphasizes the importance of meeting the highest safety standards.

The EDA isn’t just for dentists though. It’s for dental students and for patients as well. Dental students have access to all the same features dentists have access to, while patients can find information about the “Green My Dentist Program.” Patients who already have a dental home but are concerned about that office’s practices can get a form letter off the EDA Web site and write to their dentist. Patients also have access to alliances the EDA has established. In October, EDA partnered with “Green Halloween” promoting recycled costumes and highlighting the concerns of sugar and the importance of brushing and flossing afterward.

The EDA is all about encouraging dentists, no matter what shade of green, to continue the intentional effort to think about the environment and to implement whatever positive changes they can into their practices. “Do something,” Pockrass says. “Even if that something is rethinking.”

References:
1. http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/d0cf6618525a9efb85257359003f6b0d/a640db2ebad201cd852577ab00634848?OpenDocument