

Media release

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Call for “green” architects to design for health promotion

A relatively inexpensive but effective assault on the twin epidemics of type 2 diabetes and heart disease could come from the emerging sustainable building industry, the Public Health Association conference was told today.

Susan Bidwell, a regional public health analyst with the Canterbury District Health Board told the conference in Dunedin that while “green” buildings promote and protect environmental health they may be missing some simple opportunities to actively promote the health of the occupants.

“There is of course plenty of overlap. A building sited to maximise sunlight or designed to eliminate the emission of toxic compounds from furnishings will be beneficial to workers in that building. But there are areas that do not overlap,” Ms Bidwell told the delegates.

In a first-of-its-kind study in New Zealand, Susan Bidwell and her research partner, Dr Anna Stevenson, pulled together international findings on how to make a building healthy and the benefits of that. One example is the design and location of stairs in an office building.

Studies of sedentary workers using the stairs over several weeks or months, found significant health benefits. “Blood pressure, cholesterol level, respiratory condition, reduction in fat, heart rate – all were improved as a result of doing no more than climbing stairs.

“Banks of lifts are usually very easy to find and easy to use and so people ride them to their offices. The stairs, the regular use of which would give real health benefits, are tucked away, sometimes behind doors that need passes. They’re poorly lit, narrow, cold, sometimes smelly – no wonder workers avoid them!

“The healthy option has to be the easy option. Easy-to-access, conveniently placed stairways with nice wide steps so people can ascend in pairs, plenty of landings to stop for breath, well lit. This is just one example of how office design can enhance health.”

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