I attended a “strange” kind of ceremony recently, where two members of our faculty, Bob Mash and Elizabeth Wasserman, planted three trees in front of our faculty building in Tygerberg. In September 2007 they travelled to Kampala to participate in the Network: Towards Unity For Health Conference. On their return they convinced the Faculty to accept that buying trees to offset research related travel carbon emissions was a legitimate expense, and purchased 3 trees using their research funds. I would like to share with all readers of SA Family Practice their explanation:

“The relentless rise in global carbon emissions is predicted to continue over the next 10 years. By 2015, if there is no reduction, then the impact on the world’s climate will be both uncontrollable and catastrophic." In the health sector the main risks are the direct effects of extreme weather conditions, changes in patterns of infectious diseases, effects on food production and freshwater, displacement of vulnerable populations and loss of income. Adverse effects in low income countries are likely to be much higher. Loss of healthy life years is predicted to be 500 times more in Africa than in Europe.

The scientific community is in agreement that this phenomenon is due to human activity and is driven by a host of factors such as the burning of carbon fuels to make electricity, as part of industry or to transport ourselves and our products using the internal combustion engine. This, for example, is compounded by ever rising demand for more electricity and cars as well as inefficient and wasteful use of these resources. The rising demand is driven by increases in population as well as development, which adopts the same environmentally harmful practices.

One of the major contributors is air travel due to the burning of jet fuel. Additional effects of planes on the atmosphere such as the condensation trails increase the warming effect by a factor of 2.7. While most other human activities such as use of cars or production of electricity have already developed alternative technologies that can reduce emissions there is no current alternative for travel by plane. At the same time, air travel has become cheaper and amongst the more affluent sectors there is no current alternative for travel by plane.

Assuming as academics and researchers that we significantly reduce our overall flying time, it is unrealistic to demand an absolute prohibition. When air travel is necessary it has been proposed that planting trees can offset the effect. This is because mature trees over time will capture the carbon in their growth that was produced by air travel. While it is not yet an exact science, a number of websites such as http://www.trees.co.za enable you to calculate the number of trees necessary to “offset a particular flight”.

**References**