

*(Editor's note: We take great pride in presenting op-ed pieces written by members of the first graduating class of RNs from the Bachelor of Science Nursing program run by Algonquin College and the University of Ottawa - thus the column's name, "First Class Nursing." The columns will explore health and lifestyle opportunities from a fresh perspective. We hope you enjoy them!)*



## **Should Plastic Shopping Bags be a Thing of Our Past?**

**Special to the Observer by Miranda MacLanders**

Cloth shopping bags, you see them everywhere these days. Society is becoming increasingly environmentally aware, and retailers are taking advantage of this new found passion we have to protect our environment. But what is the real story behind the emergence of reusable bags?

Disposable plastic bags, like the ones that are given out in grocery stores and shopping malls are a hazard to our environment. People need to know the impact that these convenience items have on our environment and we all need to take steps to reduce the number of plastic bags we send to our landfills each and every day.

It is estimated that 55 million shopping bags are taken home by Canadians every week, and every Canadian puts nearly 20 kilograms of plastic in the garbage per year. Unfortunately, these seemingly harmless, thin plastic bags are made from oil and can take nearly 1000 years to break down. When they are buried, they disrupt plant life by altering water and air entry into the soil, even when they break down into smaller and smaller pieces. If the bags are burned, they release toxins into the air. As well, bags are being found in increasing numbers in our oceans, where they are killing sea animals that mistake them for food.

We are lucky to have recycling in the Petawawa/Pembroke area which accepts plastic shopping bags, but not every place is so fortunate, and we can do better. Bag recycling is only available to half of the residents in Ontario, but in some areas where there is bag recycling only 22% of the bags are being sent to be recycled. This leaves a lot of plastic destined for our landfills.

Fortunately, there are other options we can use to reduce the number of plastic bags we use and throw away. For instance, we could use cloth shopping bags that are becoming more and more available; we could politely refuse bags that are offered for small items or items with a handle that we can carry easily; we can avoid double bagging; we could have retailers charge for the bags; or we can get rid of this type of bags in our community.

There is at least one community in Canada that has placed a ban on plastic bags, the small community of Leaf Rapids in Manitoba. It is the first Canadian community to do so and other communities are looking to follow suit. In Quebec, there was a motion to make each bag cost 20 cents in an effort to decrease the number of bags used, but this motion is still under review. Toronto is also looking at charging 25 cents per bag. Ireland has a similar tax on plastic bags called PlasTax that was introduced in 2002 and their use of bags has dropped by 90%. In fact there are bans on plastic bags in many countries including Bangladesh, Zanzibar, Rwanda and South Africa. So, maybe it is time for our community to make an attempt to reduce the number of plastic bags we use.

There is also the option of compostable plastic bags. These bags are made from starches or corn, and they can decompose in a few weeks. Unfortunately, these bags are not often used by retailers, possibly because they cost more than the plastic bags, though the Canadian company Mountain Equipment Co-op has opted to use the starch based bags.

Why we still use these bags comes down to convenience. They are cheap, strong, versatile and available nearly everywhere. Yet, these factors are the same ones that have caused many of our cupboards to be overflowing with these carrying appliances.

In an effort to try to do our part, my family decided to invest in a few cloth bags and try it out. Cloth bags are very affordable, ours cost only one dollar each. We can pack our bags full of groceries and feel fairly confident that they are not going to break because they are much stronger than the plastic ones. Of course it takes a bit to always remember to take the bags with us, but we are getting better. We are not perfect; we realise as we walk away from the store and look into our shopping cart at the cloth bags full of products, and our box of disposable diapers for our child, that our household still has a way to go. By taking one thing at a time we can all make a difference. Opting to use cloth bags and forgo plastic is just one little thing that we all can do to help our environment.