

Managing Editor's Desk

Nelson Fabian, M.S.



Add to the EH Job Description: The Need to Balance Media Sensationalism and Public Skepticism

First, two qualifications.

1. *I am no fan of media sensationalism. I have become very cynical about the media's need to both hype stories and create clever eye-catching headlines in order to achieve high ratings. Let's face it—the media is just another industry that survives and thrives when it makes money. When news sells (thanks to the hype and headlines), ratings and newspaper circulations climb. Advertising revenue pours in. And the industry is happy, even if the news they've reported has been "slightly" exaggerated or dramatized.*

2. *I support the tourism and hospitality industry and believe that it is essential to a healthy America.*

One in eight Americans is employed in this industry. It is the first-, second-, or third-largest employer in 29 states. Today it is suffering. Half a million jobs within it have been lost since 9/11. In the first quarter of this year, the nation's GDP dropped by a whopping 4.6%. Spending on travel, however, dropped by an astounding 15.4%! Understandably, the travel industry calls these numbers "devastating." For the good of our country and the many Americans employed in this industry, we all have to wish it a speedy recovery.

OK, with those qualifications on the table, let me now share a rather interesting public/environmental health moment that I recently had.

The occasion was an outstanding presentation by an official of the tourism industry's U.S. Travel Association. As the presentation began, we were given what amounted to a "state of the industry" report that was largely a scroll of one discouraging statistic after another. One couldn't help but feel the pain that continues to permeate through this vital industry to this day. (I will add that much of this presentation hit close to home since associations like

According to the speaker I was listening to, the overreaction to H1N1 was both tragic and needless.

NEHA depend on your desire and ability to travel in order to have successful meetings and conferences. When your travel is curtailed by budget cutbacks, we quite literally also feel the pain in the form of diminished revenues and budget deficits, which lead to cutbacks in our resources, salaries, staffing levels, etc.)

In any event, the presentation was proceeding just fine when suddenly, the topic turned to H1N1 and the role of both public health and the media. Talk about a bashing! It was merciless! To be both clear and fair, the target of the speaker's wrath was the media, and in particular, "media sensationalism." Public and environmental health was guilty by implication, however—not for anything directly, but rather for not standing up strongly enough to stop the media from sensationalizing this story.

Now, I understand the anger. In the days following those initial reports coming out of Mexico, the travel and tourism industry got battered. (Rumor has it that the president of Mexico even called the World Health Organization secretary urging WHO not to announce that there was

a pandemic, because the travel industry in his country was so devastated.) As if the debilitating economic recession weren't enough, here came H1N1 and the terrifying thought that this was the big one that public health had been predicting. That thought translated into a veritable punch in the stomach for the industry in the form of further significant cutbacks in travel. Talk about getting kicked when you are down! I have many friends in the hospitality industry and for them, last spring was the ultimate banishment to the desert.

According to the speaker I was listening to, the overreaction to H1N1 was both tragic and needless and he wasn't about to give any quarter to any other point of view.

In hindsight, it isn't surprising that the media and public/environmental health have been lumped together and accused of crying wolf. The tourism industry is understandably upset as it continues to struggle with the economic downturn. But hold the phones ... even though we can be empathetic, we can't let their economic plight compromise the professional and moral responsibilities that we have. That is why I later sought the speaker out to express my displeasure at the way he pandered to the audience's need to blame someone for their plight.

After the necessary prerequisites that included telling him that I too disdained media sensationalism, I then (emphatically) explained that *it was entirely possible in those early days that the media didn't do enough!* I let him know that when the first cases of H1N1 started to appear, no one knew what the epidemiology of this disease was going to look like. For all we knew, this WAS the big one! On the chance that it was, it was our professional, and I would

continued on page 38

Letters to the Editor

The Environmental Health Workforce

Dear Editor:

The attention to the environmental health workforce as delineated in NEHA President Welford Robert's column is laudable (*JEH*, September 2009). Indeed, the establishment of a NEHA environmental health workforce development committee is a significant step forward in view of the broad array of developments now under the "environmental health umbrella," not the least of which are the increasing concerns about infectious disease, which clearly have environmental dimensions. President Robert's proposal is timely and is given a sense of relevance and urgency by, among other developments, a recent report: "Workforce Development: Preparing the Next Generation against Infectious Disease Threats." The report is the outcome of a highly productive workshop on May 26, 2009, at the Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, DC. The workshop brought together public health experts, specialists in security, public health law, and first responders, among others, for a fresh look at ways for improving workforce development for human health preparedness and response. The workshop recognized that considerable efforts had been devoted to workforce training

and development but despite these activities, there are major challenges in developing a multigenerational and multidisciplinary workforce that can respond to unusual infectious disease threats.

Significantly, the workshop participants concluded that the next generation of public health professionals is not being educated at a rate commensurate to fill positions in public health departments that will be lost to retirements alone.

On another topic, evidence abounds that the front lines of an outbreak included responders from a variety of backgrounds, including environmental health, and the workshop report encourages cross-training of professionals to better anticipate outbreaks and respond to a disease's far-reaching and sometimes unexpected effects.

The report includes numerous other recommendations that may well inform the deliberations of the NEHA environmental health workforce development committee, which can make a significant contribution to the global discussions on the public health workforce.

Bailus Walker, Jr., PhD, MPH
Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health
Howard University College of Medicine
Washington, DC

Managing Editor's Desk

continued from page 46

argue, moral responsibility to properly warn the public that they might be in danger and that some degree of caution (which included possibly reconsidering travel so as to minimize one's exposure to this virus) might be in order.

When faced with a threat to the public's health that had the potential for being catastrophic, what other course do we have than to honestly explain, teach, and urge caution (which became even the CDC's mantra)? If in fact this thing had blown up into a 1918-type pandemic and we had remained silent (or had advised the media to tone it down), what possible credibility could we ever have again? Moreover, if we had the power to reduce illness and save lives and we didn't use it, how could anyone in this profession ever say again that they were a "professional," to say nothing of being a responsible human being?

Yes, as time has marched on and as we have learned so much more about this new virus, we can now say that it didn't erupt as a cataclysmic threat to human health. But that conclusion comes with the benefit of hindsight and some six months of telling epidemiology. No hindsight or epidemiological story line was available when this thing broke loose last spring.

Again, I understand the plight of the travel industry and I wish it were otherwise. I hate this recession for what it has done to so many people, including many within our own ranks. But taking out the enormous frustration that is felt in that industry on the media ... and by implication, even us ... undercuts public health principles, panders to people's cynicism, and creates doubt in the public's mind that cautious approaches, such as what public health did last spring, are credible and in the public's best interests.

That reaction is supremely dangerous and we all owe it to our moral and professional ethics to confront challenges like this. After all, if issues with this level of media exposure get characterized in the public's mind as simply another Y2K fairy tale, then should the big one ever hit, the task of educating the public into behaviors designed to reduce morbidity and mortality will be that much more difficult. This could happen because public cynicism could convert our well-intentioned messages into the notion that we are just crying wolf again. A situation like this quickly reduces into a "playing with fire" event where the stakes involve the health and safety of the communities we're entrusted to protect.

Life IS hard and unfair. The human capacity for reflection and the human desire to find meaning often leads us to seek explanations and sometimes even scapegoats for our problems. I am not insensitive to the travel industry's predicament and its understandable urge to scream out. I am also fed up with journalism's descent into sensationalism, even if this has become their ticket to survival. Public and environmental health professionals, however, have jobs to do and citizens to protect. I'm convinced that the job includes standing up to reckless and misguided versions of history such as I heard at that travel industry conference. By so doing we balance out media sensationalism on the one hand and an all-too-easy-to-develop (and dangerous) public skepticism on the other. In the end, getting to this balance speaks as much to our capabilities and our contributions to society as anything else that we are able to do.

I would respectfully suggest that this may be the most important line in your entire job description, even if you can't find it in writing anywhere!

