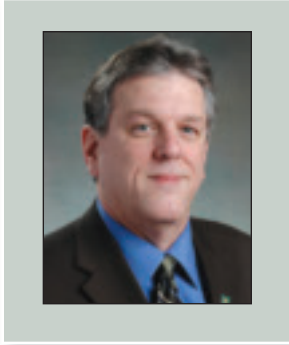


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Bunnies, Bed Bugs, and Blackberries

As I arrived home from work one late summer evening, the whole family was in an uproar over our loss of connectivity. No Internet. No cable TV. No telephone. I was concerned as well: I needed to do some NEHA work that involved my remote desktop from my office. The TV didn't bother me as much as it did my other family members—only summer reality shows are on in late August. The thing that really bothered me was that we had no telephone. I had switched over to the Internet phone service offered by my Internet provider a few months prior in order to save a couple of bucks monthly. All the family members have cell phones but not having that land line really bothered me. I called my Internet provider. After punching through a multitude of telephone button prompts I was finally able to speak to a human being. She assured me that no outages had occurred in my neighborhood and that a customer service representative would be able to come out two days hence—between noon and 6:00 p.m.! I had to take my service request higher because neither my wife nor I could be home then; we both work, and although my eldest daughter was home from college for the summer, she works as well. My Internet provider finally agreed to have a service repairman meet us at home after 6:30 p.m. the next day. Needless to say, I read some that evening and went to bed with my cell phone on the nightstand.

The next morning I was scheduled to attend a "Bedbug Workforce Meeting With Community and Federal Partners" meet-

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ing in Columbus that was arranged by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA). You see, the national bed bug invasion has caused a great deal of controversy across our county. Some 70 folks attended the meeting of federal, state, and local agencies; pest control operators; and various other stakeholders. My good friend, Captain Mike Herring, was there representing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Additionally, other stakeholders from states such as Minnesota and Kentucky were teleconferenced into the meeting. The bedbug resurgence has come out of nowhere, and as you can now see in the national news media, it is getting extensive coverage. The issue is really like no other I have seen in my career, especially with its nexus to the practice of environmental health. Let me explain.

According to the most recent and thorough research on the matter, bed bugs do

not transmit disease. In the true sense of the word they are not vectors. No doubt, infestations wreak havoc on individuals. They do cause secondary infections, especially with children and the elderly, when the scratching becomes severe. They are insidious, sucking a sleeping human victim's blood at night, and they understandably cause mental health issues. Since they don't transmit disease, however, and given public health's dwindling resources in this age of cutbacks and reduced government, bed bugs are not a top priority in public health programs that have been reduced or eliminated and forced to rank program priorities in order to best deliver environmental health services.

Where does this insidious problem rank when it's thrown into the mix along with infant mortality, immunizations (including H1N1), food protection, water quality, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, and onsite sewage disposal? Not higher than any of those in most local health departments, I'd venture to guess. It's a new issue at least compared to the last 40 years or so—out of the blue for most of us, and to complicate it all the more, solutions are hard to come by. Bed bugs' resistance to pesticides also muddies the waters. The one pesticide that has proven to be effective, propoxur, is effective because it has a residual of toxicity that will keep on killing the insects and their hatching eggs through the gestation period. But it is not approved for in-home use by U.S. EPA because of that residual toxin; it is a carba-

mate type of chemical and therefore neurological damage to children is a concern. These classifications of chemicals block the production and action of cholinesterase, an essential nervous system enzyme. The toxins quickly paralyze the nervous systems of insects, giving them a reputation of having a rapid “knockdown” effect. Furthermore, bed bugs are likely to develop a resistance to propoxur over time. This conundrum leaves the environmental health practitioner to ponder the question of health effects; to my thinking, the protection of children—especially the underserved who are more likely to be living in substandard housing—trumps the extensive use of a residual pesticide. Other options exist for battling the critters. The safest, and unfortunately most expensive, option is heat treatment. Raising the temperature to 113°F of homes, apartment buildings, and hotel and hospital rooms where bed bugs are found seems to do the trick. The rub is the expense, which has already led to tenant-landlord disputes as to who should pay the pest control company—a company that may have invested thousands of dollars for the specialized equipment needed for the heat treatment methodology.

After a quick lunch of catered pizzas, the meeting continued. As it continued, I noticed something that I want to mention here. My Blackberry buzzed, despite the low battery signal from having it at my bedside

the night before. I had an incoming message from NEHA Executive Director Nelson Fabian. I was reading the message guardedly but I noticed a fair number of meeting participants clicking away, not so guardedly. It occurred to me that such open connectivity was, well, downright rude to the speaker—and I was as guilty as the rest. The “staying connected” mode is something I’ve been noticing more and more in meetings. Almost everyone has their electronic tether close at hand and thinks nothing of picking it up and tapping out a response to a text or e-mail. As in the meeting referenced above, cell phones still ring often, causing the offender (who either didn’t shut his/her phone off or switch it to vibrate), to scramble to find it before it rings a third time and distracts everyone even more. Besides being rude to the speaker, our constant need to be connected demonstrates a bigger problem, I think. In a recent column George Will calls it “Lost in Electronica—The costs of ‘the chaos of constant connection’” and I found myself agreeing with much of what he said. He contends we as adults “seem insatiably hungry for handheld devices that deliver limitless distractions. . . .” He goes on to cite recent research that suggests the constant short-term stimulation from digital devices, the constant Internet surfing, and video gaming may impede long-term memory on “which important forms of intelligence depend.” I’d say another effect of

texting, especially texting to the extent that both my daughters do, is a butchering of the English language in no small way. R U still reading this? That outcome can’t be good!

The meeting drew to a close and I returned to my Columbus office a few miles away to finish out the day. Since my Blackberry had finally died from being on so long, I had to check my office e-mail for one thing. I also had to arrive home that evening by 6:00 p.m. to meet the cable guy. I got home just after 6:00 p.m. and the cable guy took me out back to show me the cable underneath our deck that had been chewed through by one of the two bunnies living there. Hence the third “B” for this month’s column. The rabbit population under my deck had been reduced to one a few days earlier as my wife witnessed a hawk swooping down and snatching one of them, much to her horror! The scene affected her so much she now stands guard when she lets our 13 lb. daschund out although I’ve assured her he’s quite safe and would give the hawk pause to try anything stupid. The cable was replaced with a bright orange one that lay on the ground for a couple of weeks before a crew of cable guys buried it. The Krinn family was happily reconnected—phone, cable TV, and Internet—and all was right with the world. ☹☹



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