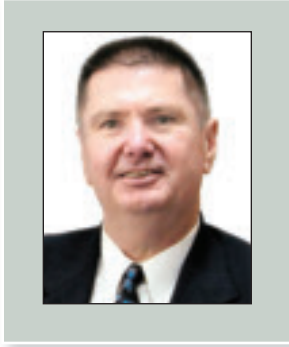


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Mel Knight, REHS

Mel Knight, REHS— An Introduction

Following the practice of many NEHA past presidents, I am taking the opportunity to use this first message as a self introduction. As I won't have the chance to meet each and every member, I hope that sharing some of my background and experience will provide you with insight on my perspectives and qualifications to serve in this NEHA leadership position.

I'll begin by thanking you as members for allowing me to represent you and the profession. I sincerely view serving as a NEHA officer and member of the board of directors as a gift and a very special experience.

Personal Career Evolution and History

I'm a native Californian and a baby boomer, born just after World War II in Oakland. While California is now going through a rough period like much of our country, I take pride in the rich California history of leadership and accomplishment specific to our field. NEHA's origins can be traced back to a California initiative in 1928. The first Sanitarian Registration Act in the nation was passed in California in 1945, as I was frequently reminded by one of my first directors, the late Tom McMorrow, who held California Sanitarian Registration Number One! California has often been on the cutting (and sometimes bleeding?) edge, initiating environmental health standards and practices that have been influential, if not precedent setting for the rest of the country.

My interest in the field began with a defining experience in high school when my

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younger brother was diagnosed with and later succumbed to cancer. His numerous hospitalizations and care led to my interest in health careers, and I was able to find work in hospitals, clinics, and health centers while in high school and later in college. I majored in health science at what is now California State University at Northridge (CSUN), preparing myself for a number of career options, including but not limited to environmental health.

The early 1970s experienced a recession similar to today's that limited career opportunities, and my first public health employment was in a temporary position as a research assistant with the California Department of Public Health Tumor Registry in Berkeley. This led to a more permanent analyst position that I held until I received the results on my sanitarian registration exam, and new opportunities opened up. (A lesson to be shared with those new to or interested in the field: getting your "foot in the door" by working or

even volunteering in just about any capacity at a prospective employer is one of the best strategies in a tough employment market).

As is the case today, obtaining sanitarian registration helped in securing employment and I was able to start my environmental health career in Contra Costa County. I began my training and in time advanced to journey level as a district sanitarian. I later had opportunities to do specialized assignments in vector control and childhood lead poisoning prevention, also gaining administrative and leadership experience.

The county lead poisoning project experience led to a chance for me to return to the state health department as a consulting sanitarian where I provided statewide lead training. This experience led to interesting assignments in the emerging area of "toxics." I was able to serve there as a team member in numerous environmental epidemiology investigations, many at newly discovered and soon-to-become-infamous "toxic waste" sites. This stimulated an interest in pursuing additional graduate studies in environmental and occupational toxicology, and I eventually became a supervisor and chief for state hazardous materials inspectors in southern California.

In the late 1980s I returned to local government in northern California and managed the Sacramento County hazmat programs, which later merged with the environmental health programs in a newly created environmental management department (EMD). I retired from Sacramento County in 2006 after serving as director of environmental health and department head of EMD for 12

years. Comprehensive environmental health agencies such as EMD that operate outside of traditional public health departments are common in California and offer a number of challenges as well as opportunities that I plan to expand upon in a future message.

Professional Association Involvement

I was committed to networking and information sharing from the earliest days of my career, and there is no better place than a professional association for interacting with smart and positive peers. I still remember the first California Environmental Health Association (CEHA) northern California chapter meeting I attended in Alameda County. Dick Pantages, a recent NEHA president, was one of the inspirational leaders at that local chapter meeting. The chapter requested a representative from Contra Costa County, and I quickly volunteered. This led to more than 30 years of serving in elected and appointed positions on local, state, and national associations, mostly affiliated with NEHA and all related to environmental health. I recently

served as a practitioner representative to the Environmental Health Accreditation Council (EHAC), and currently represent NEHA on work groups advising the National Center for Environmental Health (CDC/NCEH) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

I am an unapologetic “joiner” because I remain convinced that if you are committed to your profession, you should keep company with the best and the brightest. Association and advisory work group service has allowed me to make acquaintance with and learn from some of the true icons in our field. I am occasionally asked why I continue to spend so much of my time volunteering for committees and work groups. It is not driven so much by a sense of service or obligation, but rather more by the personal pleasure and rewarding experiences I invariably receive.

I recently had a chance to speak at a state environmental health association conference and I shared my experiences in observing as well as developing quality, award-winning programs. The major point of the presentation was that one of the easiest ways to achieve personal or program improvements is to seek out

the best practices of others and adopt their activities and accomplishments. NEHA, state affiliates, and local chapters are some of the best conduits for these “best practices” examples and networking opportunities.

Invitation for Dialogue

While this first message was a personal introduction, subsequent messages will deal with timely and significant issues facing our profession. NEHA's greatest strength is the energy and power of our large and growing membership. The diversity of experiences and expertise of thousands of members is invaluable. I invite you to feel free to share any constructive thoughts, interests, and concerns related to the profession or the association with me or other officers and board of directors members. Our contact information is included in every issue of the *JEH* and at the Web site www.neha.org, and we welcome your input. 🐼

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Students Section

Information and opportunities abound behind the research and development button on NEHA's homepage. Visit neha.org/research to obtain the latest on the following NEHA federally funded programs, many of which include free or low-cost training and educational opportunities:

- ◆ Food Safe Schools Program
- ◆ Environmental Health Workforce Development Program
- ◆ Environmental Public Health Tracking Program
- ◆ Epi-Ready Team Training Program
- ◆ Land Use Planning and Design Program
- ◆ Onsite Wastewater System Program
- ◆ Radon/Indoor Air Quality Training Program