

▶ THE PRACTITIONER'S TOOL KIT

Personal Safety on the Job, Something to Consider

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Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide relevant and useful information for environmental health practitioners. In a recent membership survey, we heard your request for information in the *Journal* that is more applicable to your daily work. We listened and are pleased to feature this column from a cadre of environmental health luminaries with over 300 years of combined experience in the environmental health field. This group will share their tricks of the trade to help you create a tool kit of resources for your daily work.

The conclusions of this column are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA, nor does it imply endorsement of any products, services, or resources mentioned.

Safety? How boring. Before you dismiss this bit of advice and go to the next page, please hear us out.

When we think back on our collective careers as environmental health professionals, two things stand out. First, we enjoy the challenges of our profession and are grateful for the friendships we have formed with colleagues and clients. And second, we recall with a bit of contrition and embarrassment the witless things we did and unsurprisingly continue to do. After further reflection on the latter, we have all suffered at some point in our careers unintentional injuries and illnesses that resulted from our inspection duties and from the various exposures in the field—travel-related injuries, aggressive attacks, and work in harsh environments notwithstanding. Thankfully for most of us, our mishaps and misadventures were not serious. Yet however minor, they still resulted in distress, discomfort, and even lost time.

An internet and literature search for safety specific to our profession yielded only one reference from the International Occupational Safety and Health Information Centre of the International Labour Organization. The organization published a hazard datasheet for the sanitarian occupation in 1999 and updated it in 2000 (www.ilo.org/safework/cis/WCMS_191024/lang--en/index.htm).

To complement this reference, we recommend that you adhere to a basic rule of practice—always follow all the safety and health rules and practices at the establishments you inspect. There is nothing worse than an inspector walking around without the personal protective equipment that everyone else is wearing. It sends the wrong message!

The nature of our jobs places us in different settings, conditions, and environments. There is nothing routine or predictable about what we do or where we do it. We can minimize, however, unintentional illness and injury that

occur during our work by recognizing hazards, evaluating risks, and applying controls such as following simple safety procedures and wearing personal protective clothing and equipment that are right for the situation.

Slips and falls rank number one among all our on-site injuries. Because much of what we do is done in a wet environment, at the least you should consider wearing superior quality waterproof and slip resistant shoes, which can be cleaned and decontaminated if necessary. Consider using disposable, puncture-resistant, nitrile medical exam gloves when conducting inspections. Also, you should consider wearing eye protection that preferably has impact-resistant lenses. This practice is an easy and passive way to prevent splash and spray contagion from contacting the eye mucosa, as well as protects the eye itself, especially for contact lenses wearers. Injury from dishwasher and other cleaning chemicals and toxins are all within the realm of possibility.

The one trait that comes with age and experience is patience. And with patience comes the ability to see and analyze. It is a well-accepted axiom that over 99% of all work-related illnesses and injuries are preventable. The first step in preventing us from a misadventure is recognizing the potential hazard. Whether conducting an inspection, audit, or evaluation, take the time to see your surroundings. This practice can ensure two things. First as it relates to the job, we can see work-related traffic patterns and practices. By taking time to see the job site, you can see unexpected things that are easily overlooked if it were not for an active panoramic view. It lets you

judge drainage swales and sources of potential contamination, general environmental conditions, and subtle changes within that environment, all of which helps complete your job with accuracy and efficiency. Second, taking the time to see conditions also allows you to do a risk analysis and evaluation before embarking on the job itself, such as the actual detailed inspection.

The bottom line is observation helps keep you safe. In doing so, you can see the potential for slips and falls, burn injury, electrical shock, unrestrained animals, and infectious and toxic materials, and thereby you can act accordingly. Overall, taking the time to survey your surroundings will result in a more thorough, correct, and safe field experience. This survey will also allow you to decide if there are areas that you should not enter because special precautions, such as respiratory protection or hard hats, are needed.

Since most of our work is done in a wet environment and because we cannot see electricity, we suggest that you always carry a noncontact, pocket-sized voltage detector to

test any surface for electrical leakage before touching it. It is for your own safety. We also carry hearing protection such as earplugs. You never know when you need to enter a mechanical room during an inspection.

So much of what we do relies on understanding human factors, our own included. Someone must do something that results in contamination and damage of food, water, air, structures, and soil. Understanding that dynamic in terms of our own safety helps give us a clearer picture of tasks, workload, and work patterns. It helps define the working environment and workplace design; workplace culture and communication; worker competency and skill, and employee attitude, personality, and risk tolerance. By fine honing our observational skills, we can see fallibility in others and better understand the causes of errors and unintentional mistakes, poor judgement, and unwise decision making, as well as the disregard for procedures and regulations.

Although the examination for the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/

Registered Sanitarian credential does not emphasize safety, it nonetheless is integral to what we do. In fact, we strongly recommend that all environmental health offices and departments develop a safety justification (also known as an operating procedure). The safety justification is a document that becomes part of your organization's policy and procedures. It should include a risk assessment for the different types of field work conducted and information on the minimum required safety measures and protective equipment needed. It should include technical documentation to justify the requirements and it should be updated annually and expanded with the results of the job risk assessment. The safety justification is intended to ensure your safety and the safety of your colleagues and to protect them from accidents and damage to their health or the environment. You may thank us later. ✿

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