

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Environmental Health Touches All Aspects of Our Lives

New is the year and new are the hopes, resolution, and spirits. All of us from the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) wish you and your loved ones health, happiness, peace, and joy in the new year. 'Tis the season to enjoy the snow. As Linus Van Pelt from *Peanuts* said, "I never eat December snowflakes. I always wait until January."

In the New Year, environmental health professionals once again will be called on to lead the charge in developing solutions to address numerous challenges including climate change, emerging diseases, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), nanomaterials, and cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) blooms. Environmental health professionals are the Swiss Army knives of the scientific community with knowledge of numerous scientific disciplines, along with evaluation, management, problem solving, collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution skills practiced from the laboratory to the community. In knowledge-based communities we are the "thinks" in the *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!* children's book by Dr. Seuss.

Most people do not realize how environmental health touches all aspects of our lives. You ensure the energy facilities used to power our homes do not pollute the air, land, or water, while also keeping the workforce of the energy sector safe. When having their morning cup of coffee, most people do not realize the role we play to ensure that the water, coffee, and creamer are safe. More likely they get their java from the local coffee shop where we are at the forefront of food safety. Accord-

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ing to the Economic Research Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 55% of food consumed last year was done outside of the home, which demonstrates the increasing importance of retail food safety.

If we were living in the early 1800s, many of us reading this column would not be alive, having succumbed to disease. Up until the late 1800s, poor sanitation and living conditions, lack of proper sewage management, inadequate treatment of drinking water, poor vector control, and no food inspection or garbage collection were the status quo. Due to the hard work of environmental health professionals, the U.S. life expectancy has more than doubled to almost 80 years with vast improvements in not only health but also quality of life.

Unfortunately, most people believe medical advancements—including vaccines, germ theory, and antibiotics—are the reason for the majority of the increase in life expectancy in the U.S. The sanitary revolution in the mid-19th century began the control of diseases related to poor sanitary conditions. The greatest increase in life expectancy, referred

to as the public health revolution, occurred between 1880 and 1920, before the advent of antibiotics, advanced surgical techniques, and many other medical innovations. These public health improvements were led by environmental health professionals who worked to ensure clean air, safe food and water, and healthy places to live, work, and play. Additional areas where environmental health professionals have helped increase U.S. life expectancy include motor vehicle, workplace, school, and recreational safety.

Many residents of the U.S. and other developed nations do not realize the impact environmental health issues have on many of our global neighbors. The World Health Organization (WHO) states healthier environments could prevent almost one quarter of the global burden of disease. Poor water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions cause 842,000 diarrheal deaths every year. WHO states that the reduction of environmental risks could prevent 1 in 4 child deaths. In 2012, 1.7 million deaths in children less than five years old were attributable to the environment. As my fellow Kentuckian John Prine sang, "It's a big old goofy world," and we will need to work together to reduce the global burden of disease.

One reason the public does not recognize environmental health contributions is that our accomplishments are measured in nonevents. The public does not think of the numerous lives saved by our measures including mortality from cholera from drinking water, bubonic plague from a flea bite, carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty furnace, or improper disposal of garbage that

can contaminate drinking water. We are the invisible guardians protecting the public in numerous ways. The number of lives saved by our measures is difficult to quantify.

In most cases, the public does not see our wins, only our failures. The media does not publicize nor do we report our successes, but they are quick to document our failures. We need to learn to emphasize the positive. We need to share how environmental health has improved numerous aspects of people's daily lives, including participation in policy debates. When communicating with people, I follow Benjamin Franklin's advice as much as possible: "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn."

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: "CDC estimates that each year 1 in 6 Americans get sick from

contaminated food or beverages." A more positive message would be food safety measures in the U.S. have prevented illness in 5 out of 6 people, a food safety success rate of 84%. Car companies use positive advertising to emphasize what consumers want in a car: safety, performance, or quality. Car companies do not focus on the negative. I have never heard or seen a car advertisement stating that due to a warranty issue, only 10% of their customers had to bring in their vehicles for a repair in their first year of ownership.

I feel that a quote by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt from a speech given at the Sorbonne in Paris on April 23, 1910, sums up the efforts of environmental health professionals whose hard work to help our people and communities is often unrecognized. He stated that it is not the critic, the person who

points out who stumbles, or where things could have been done better that matter. What matters is the person in the field who strives to work for a worthy cause with devotion and enthusiasm while learning from their errors and failures. The full quote can be found at <https://speakola.com/political/theodore-roosevelt-man-in-the-arena-1910>.

I am honored to be in the arena with my fellow environmental health professionals. As Dory in *Finding Nemo* sang, "Just Keep Swimming," which myself, my fellow professionals, and NEHA plan to keep doing to build, sustain, and empower an effective environmental health workforce to provide healthy environments for all. 🌸



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Did You Know?

The fourth edition of the *CP-FS Study Guide* is now available as an e-book and can be purchased in the Google Play Store. You will need to download the Google Play Books app to read the e-book on your device. Find instructions on how to purchase the book, including discounted pricing for NEHA members, at www.neha.org/cpfs-credential.

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