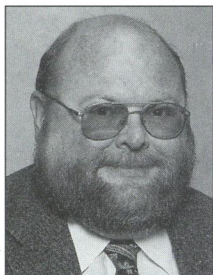


President's Message

James D. Dingman, M.S., R.E.H.S.



Are You Up to the Challenge?

I heard a statistic a while back that really concerns me. It had to do with the students enrolled in environmental health programs at universities. The statistic is that overall enrollment in environmental health programs is down over 30 percent from what it was just a few years ago. Then I heard that one university was thinking seriously about discontinuing its program because of declining enrollment. My concern is what impact this situation will have on our profession—a good portion of our current workforce is heading toward retirement age. Will there be an adequate supply of *qualified* professionals to take their place?

I asked myself why: Why are students not enrolling in environmental health programs? Several answers occurred to me. Some may say that the decline in enrollment could just be a phase in a cycle that programs go through. Maybe the environmental health profession is saturated, and there is no demand for additional students. I don't think so! Maybe there is no interest in the profession. Again, I don't think so. One answer does, I believe, deserve closer attention. Could it be that the reason enrollment is declining is that very few prospective students know who we are or what the environmental health profession really does?

Many, if not most, students enter college knowing what they want to be—engineers, biologists, and so forth. Even though the environmental health major is identified in course catalogues, however, prospective students often do not know what the field of environmental health is, and so may not be as likely to choose it as their major. Sure, there are exceptions, but I believe this statement to be true on the whole. It seems that unless prospective students have had prior exposure to the profession, the likelihood that they will choose a career in environmental health depends on

their “discovering” the profession while enrolled in another major. Do we really want to depend on this kind of discovery to provide enough qualified individuals to fill our ranks in the future? I think not.

Students need to be made aware of the environmental health profession early on in their education—perhaps even as early as middle school. One way to reach impressionable young minds is for environmental health professionals to take an active part in their early education.

It is up to each of us to ensure that there are dedicated and qualified individuals available in our workforce to carry out the broad range of services we are called upon to provide.

Participation in school career days provides an excellent opportunity for young people to learn about our profession. In fact, at the NEHA Annual Educational Conference in Minneapolis, I challenged the affiliate presidents to get their members involved in these career days. I would suggest that affiliates develop a presentation on environmental health as a career that their members could use for such programs. Once these presentations are developed, it would be appropriate for them to be shared with other affiliates.

Information can also reach potential professionals (as well as the general public) by other means, such as booths at summer fairs and festivals and public-service announcements. The possibilities are unlimited.


When we have done a better job raising awareness of environmental health and the environmental health profession among young people, then I believe we will experience greater success in bringing them into a mindset of interest in an environmental health career.

Next question: Once we have been able to get students to enroll in environmental health programs, how can we be assured that they are receiving the type of education necessary for them to function properly in this profession?

The National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council sees to this need by providing accreditation services for environmental health programs. Such accreditation indicates that an academic program has been found to have the curriculum, faculty, facilities, and institutional support necessary to provide quality environmental health science and protection education. These criteria provide a foundational core for a quality educational program and are regularly reviewed and updated to meet the ever-changing demands of the marketplace.

The situation that exists in the world today is fueling the need for new programs and skills. When this need is coupled with the ever-present need to maintain our current environmental health programs, it is essential that a highly qualified workforce be available and in place.

It is up to each of us to ensure that there are dedicated and qualified individuals available in our workforce to carry out the broad range of services we are called upon to provide.

Are you up to the challenge? 

Jim Dingman