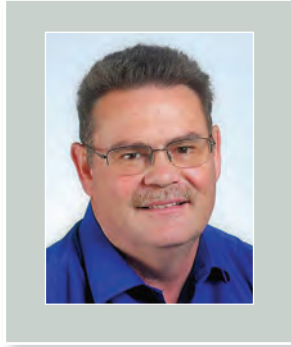


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Roy Kroeger, REHS

Environmental Health Has More to Do!

If you have followed my columns each month, you may recall that I mentioned in my first column about reaching out to environmental health programs that we do not think of every day. We all understand that environmental health exists at the intersection of the environment and human health. The climate in which we live affects our health in profound ways. Environmental health professionals are working hard every day to prevent disease and poor health through food safety, water quality, air quality, and hazardous materials program implementation.

Our environment, however, is so much more than just these few but significant programs. I want to talk about environmental health issues beyond those that we think of every day. Healthy community design, sustainability, climate change, and public health preparedness are significant environmental health concerns that rarely rise to the top of our to-do list. Yet, each of these is contributing to declining health conditions in our country.

Of the four programs mentioned, public health preparedness receives the most financial support from government agencies. Following the 9/11 attack, President George W. Bush pledged that the country would improve public health's response. In early 2002, that administration approved nearly \$1 billion to strengthen state and local public health departments. That money has been reduced drastically since 2002 but still exceeds expenditure for most environmental health-related programs.

With the recent hurricane that hit Louisiana and then traveled through the eastern U.S., federal, state, and local health depart-

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ments responded more collaboratively than they have in the past. The improved response was due to training and resources that have evolved since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Ida had much stronger winds than Katrina and the rain continued throughout the country, but preparedness helped prevent a disaster similar to Katrina. Preparedness funding has been cut significantly since 9/11. Less funding equates to a decrease in training and resources for the future. Hopefully we have learned that being prepared is worth every dollar spent on it.

Climate change is the next environmental health concern that I believe needs more attention. I do not want to start arguing the politics of whether this problem is man-made or not. The real issue is that the climate has changed and environmental health has a role in protecting public health. Vectors, disease, storms, heat waves, drought, fires, floods, and even aquifer depletion affect human health. Higher summertime and lower wintertime temperatures lead to an increase in exposure deaths. These deaths are more common in low-income and impoverished populations with increased exposure and

less ability to protect themselves from temperature extremes. Most of us are also aware that climate change has allowed vectors to bring new diseases into our country and has expanded the range of existing conditions further inland and to the north.

Environmental health professionals are working in many ways to improve health regarding climate change. Some areas of interest include reducing greenhouse gases released to the environment and improving water conservation in drier climates. Professionals have worked to minimize the vectors that carry disease. They continually prepare to respond to natural disasters. Environmental health is there to mitigate exposure to sewage in flooding events and provide public information about smoke caused by wildfires.

Sustainability, natural resources, water quantity, and solar, wind, and hydroelectric power are all areas where environmental health can improve health. Many of these programs work to reduce climate change. Additional programs can improve health with the use of technology and research. Many parts of the central U.S. are depleting aquifers faster than they can be recharged and sustainable practices can reduce water use and improve agricultural processes. The transportation of fossil fuels has become more polarized than the extraction ever was; sustainable policies can decrease fossil fuel consumption and reduce the need to transfer as much energy across the country. Reuse and recycling have become more complex and expensive than ever. The improper disposal of prescription drugs pollutes water supplies. Failure to renovate homes to make

them more energy efficient is wasting valuable natural resources. All of these examples are sustainable practices that environmental health professionals are part of.

Building healthy communities is the last program that I want to mention in this column. It is also one of my favorites. As a former runner and current bicyclist, I often review new subdivision plans with connectivity in mind. Can I walk or bicycle from point A to point B and beyond? Unfortunately, the answer is usually no! In a perfect environment, everyone would have access to everything they need within their neighborhood. Work, groceries, entertainment, and recreation would all be located within walking or biking distance. Instead, we have become a society where most people want everything around them to be the same as what is around others. This desire has led to cookie-cutter subdivisions where residents have to drive for everything they want or need—driving your kids to their friend’s house or school, driving to work, driving to the store, and driving almost anywhere else we want to be.

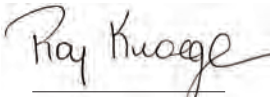
As a consequence, our society has become heavier and much less healthy than our ancestors. Our country has made great strides to improve sanitary conditions and advance the technology and knowledge in healthcare. For nearly a century, people in the U.S. have seen their life expectancy increase each year. In 2014 that life expectancy started to decrease slowly. And now, even prior to COVID-19, heart disease and obesity have started to make those numbers fall more quickly. Good community design will improve health and increase the safety of walkers, runners, and bicyclists. All the while, we are improving air quality through decreased traffic and improving people’s mental well-being.

None of these programs is sexy or easy, and most of them are expensive. And there is no readily available funding method to pay for most of them. Many communities are already cash-strapped and do not want to increase taxes to pay for these critical services.

So, how can environmental health make a difference? Changes are not going to happen overnight but they need to start somewhere.

People need to be educated and those interested need to be provided with the tools to make a difference. The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) cannot pay for these programs but we can build a trained cadre of professionals who want to make a difference. We can work with our federal partners at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to build tools to help the dedicated professionals who want to make a difference. NEHA can provide training through our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition, online training, and webinars.

Working to include more of these critical environmental health professionals in our association will help NEHA grow and at the same time, expose current members to environmental health programs that are important to everyone’s future. 🚗


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