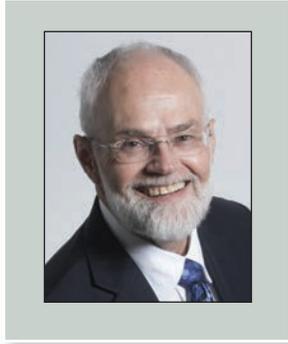


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Vince Radke, MPH, RS,
CP-FS, DLAAS, CPH

Show Me the Data

In the 1996 movie *Jerry Maguire*, sports agent Jerry Maguire (Tom Cruise) is asked by client Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) how negotiations with Rod's football team are going. During a phone call between the two, Rod emphatically instructs Jerry to "show me the money!" Like Rod, local and state leaders, the private sector, and people in our communities are asking, "Show me the data, the environmental health data!"

In environmental health, a few of us collect useful data that are used to improve the health of people in our communities. In many cases, environmental health data are not available to make decisions that can help reduce or prevent injuries, illnesses, and deaths. While at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a colleague of mine from the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), along with other people from CDC, attended a breakfast with the director of CDC. During the breakfast my colleague described the work he was doing at NCEH. The director appreciated the work my colleague was doing but said (and I'm paraphrasing here), "You know the problem with environmental health, you have no data."

After hearing this story from my colleague, I was not happy but I did realize that the director was correct. When looking at the data my colleagues in epidemiology and laboratories were collecting to help solve human health issues, environmental health was a distant third. We are, however, making progress in data collection in some areas of

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environmental health, specifically food safety and recreational water use.

Historically, many in the food service industry were reluctant to spend money to develop and staff their restaurants with certified food protection managers (CFPMs). A few in the industry saw the wisdom of having CFPMs and went ahead and placed them in their restaurants. Most told the health departments, however, that there was a lack of data that showed having a CFPM improved food safety. As data (e.g., violations, illnesses, outbreaks) were collected and analyzed over time, the benefit of having a CFPM was shown. The food service industry took notice of this benefit and regulations were passed requiring a CFPM to be present in restaurants. A similar turn of

events took place in the development of the Model Aquatic Health Code (MAHC). In its development, data on drownings, injuries, emergency department visits, and waterborne illness outbreaks were used. These data were used to help support the adoption of MAHC at state and local levels.

There are other areas in environmental health where we need data—vectorborne diseases, other waterborne diseases, hazardous and toxic substances, noise, and others. As environmental health professionals, we need to ask ourselves, "What do we not know that we need to know?" In addition, we need to take a step outside our environmental health comfort zone. We need economic data to go along with our environmental health data. To gather this information, we will need the help of others. We will need a health economist or public health economist, or better yet, an environmental health economist. Our primary data collection will always be around health but having economic data will support and lend weight to our environmental health data.

There needs to be a plan on what, how, and why we collect environmental health data. This situation reminds me of my time collecting routine environmental swab samples in kitchens as a young sanitarian at the Fairfax County Health Department. I would collect the samples, take them to the laboratory for analysis, and wait for the results. When the results came back positive or negative, I would record them in a book. If positive, I would call the restaurant to inform them of the results. There was no other follow up on my part.

To paraphrase Dr. William Foege, a former CDC director, "Collection and analysis of data shouldn't be allowed to consume resources if action does not follow." The purpose of collecting environmental health data must be known ahead of time. Collecting data for the purpose of monitoring

health is critical in environmental health. In order to get the most benefit, our data must be collected in a routine, uniform, and standardized manner. Finally, once these environmental data are collected and analyzed, they must be disseminated and communicated to key stakeholders to

ensure the health of people in our communities. 🐼

Vince _____
 President@neha.org

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