

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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Going Mobile

We engage in professional capacity building with enthusiasm, love, and purpose.

Silence punctuated by an air of expectation. No pressure, I kept reminding myself. It was a question I had anticipated but the focused stares of the search committee were nonetheless unnerving. It was December 2014 and I was a late round candidate for the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) executive director position. The question was, “What will be your priorities if you are selected for the NEHA leadership role?” My response was heartfelt and I would tender the same response today if asked again. First, treat environmental health as a contact sport. Second, remove the profession’s invisibility cloak. And third, project global leadership, including cultivation of the NEHA brand, services, and products to an international constituency. My three-legged stool.

Many, including you, may question the wisdom or rationale of reaching out beyond our own borders, particularly when we have so many challenges at home. I see it differently. There is a lot to learn by being engaged with our global counterparts. I continue to be amazed by the insights and innovation of professionals who share our values, passion, and scientific orientation. A good example is the Zika virus. The Jamaican public health community informed me during a visit there in October 2015 that Zika was present on the island, which was not publicized because of governmental concerns for the hospitality and tourist industry. When I returned home I tweeted, I e-mailed, I called. No one paid me any attention or they felt that Jamaica was irrelevant. Sadly, at the end of calendar year 2015, Puerto Rico declared its first locally transmitted case. For

the better part of 90 days our country lost an opportunity to get ahead of that mess.

Since 2015, NEHA staff and board members have been to Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Canada, Taiwan, Tasmania and mainland Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, France, Jamaica, Portugal, Malawi, and several U.S. territories including Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. A local or international sponsor covered the travel cost in about half of these visits. Each trip had a purpose, which involved preparation and action. In many cases we were the keynote speaker at a conference. In other cases we had been asked to provide technical expertise, such as the visit to Taiwan. There is only one truly effective way to learn what is important to people—it is to show up in person, share a meal, and become part of the narrative. No offense to my colleagues who spend hours connecting electronically, it just isn’t the same.

That’s why each year we invite our counterparts to attend our Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition. Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Jamaica, and Ireland, among others, are encouraged to

jump on a plane and participate in our AEC. We provide them opportunities to speak to you, meet North American environmental health influencers, and possibly take a holiday. We recognize humans are hard wired for social interaction and we plan accordingly.

As I write this column, I’m sitting in an espresso bar in Trelawny, Jamaica. NEHA President Vince Radke and I will both have an opportunity to share some thoughts with our Caribbean colleagues. Then things will get really interesting. Radke then travels later this week to Australia to speak at the Environmental Health Australia conference. Yours truly departs in 48 hours for the United Arab Emirates, where NEHA will host a plenary session at the Dubai International Food Safety Conference. NEHA will also deliver courses in instructor skills training and special processes in retail food. These face-to-face classes provide an opportunity for NEHA to showcase our continuing professional education capabilities. We hope some of the 3,000 attendees, mostly from the Middle East and North Africa, will consider becoming NEHA members and acquire our credentials.

My time in Dubai will be limited to a few days. From there we literally jet off to Geneva, Switzerland, to keynote a session at the Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health convened at the World Health Organization. I will speak on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for the environmental health workforce as we protect the health and wellness of our communities in a time of extreme climate perturbations. As there is no

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rest for the wicked, I immediately return to Denver at the conference's conclusion.

These visits provide an opportunity for us to personify NEHA. I want the global community to know we are not an abstraction or a vacuous corporate entity. I want people to know we engage in professional capacity building with enthusiasm, love, and purpose. We desire our network to feel that commitment and to be energized by it.

NEHA is also a member of the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH). This federation provides a global meeting place for environmental health professionals to meet and discuss issues of common concern. Based in the UK, 43 countries participate in IFEH events. NEHA Past-President Adam London attended its most recent conference in New Zealand. We hope to begin working on joint policy statements, white papers, and other documents that will advance the art and science of practice. Together, we may be able to accomplish things that perhaps each nation cannot do alone.



A conference attendee asks a question during a National Environmental Health Association food safety training program in Dubai. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.



National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) Entrepreneurial Zone Director Rance Baker delivers a message during a NEHA training program at the Dubai International Food Safety Conference. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

When I travel, many in my social network express worry about my health and safety. Their concerns are predicated on strange food, unfamiliar customs, and nefarious characters. I don't see it that way. Working with our international partners freshens our approaches and understanding of the world around us. What happens in the Zika forest of Uganda has implications for the U.S. and its residents. Our situational awareness is greatly enhanced

when we have personal connections with essential partners. What at first might appear as strange is simply new. New friends. New insights. New professional networks.

Speaking of new, it's a new day and time to deliver a new presentation. 🐼

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Did You Know?

NEHA's board of directors recently approved a policy statement on food safety for cottage foods and home-based restaurants. This policy statement and others on food, water, preparedness, cannabis, vector control, body art, and climate change can be found at www.neha.org/publications/position-papers.



Employers increasingly require a professional credential to verify that you are qualified and trained to perform your job duties. Credentials improve the visibility and credibility of our profession and they can result in raises or promotions for the holder. For 80 years, NEHA has fostered dedication, competency, and capability through professional credentialing. We provide a path to those who want to challenge themselves and keep learning every day. Earning a credential is a personal commitment to excellence and achievement.

Learn more at neha.org/professional-development/credentials.



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