

▶ PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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The Science of a Strange Profession

As you have probably noticed, environmental health is an unusual profession. I have often told my team that working in this field is a little bit like being on the *X-Files*. Environmental health agencies across the world seem to attract the most mind bending and inexplicable situations. To make matters more challenging, environmental health professionals are often faced with problems that other agencies and professions do not know how to handle. These problems frequently present real and significant threats to the health and safety of our communities. And while they are not supernatural, the monsters that we face—usually in the form of adverse exposure to biological or chemical agents—are no less destructive than the creatures of science fiction.

I can immediately think of three such instances during the past year when the environmental health team at my agency was called upon to address problems far outside of the programmatic responsibilities of their regularly assigned duties. In the first instance, we were notified that an old groundwater contamination site related to a long-abandoned dry cleaning operation was possibly creating vapors that could harm the occupants of nearby homes and business. The subsequent investigation revealed a disturbingly high concentration of perchloroethylene vapors in nearby structures. Our environmental health professionals were part of a cross-disciplinary team that assessed risk, developed a plan forward, and evaluated results. We now understand that this type of vapor intrusion is another pathway through which historic industrial pollution is going

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to affect human health. This issue is going to be with us for a long time and will necessitate the ongoing professional development of environmental health professionals.

In the second instance, we learned that a pet store specializing in exotic birds was experiencing an avian outbreak of psittacosis. This zoonotic disease is caused by a bacterium that can infect humans, causing pneumonia and other sequelae. Once again, this issue was completely foreign to our team. Our environmental health professionals were nevertheless able to quickly apply concepts of infection control and sanitation protocols to the situation to prevent further transmission among the birds and to humans.

Finally, like so many of you, we were looked upon to provide accurate and actionable information about Zika virus to people in our community. The scientific expertise that our profession has developed regarding mosquito-borne diseases has been priceless.

In each of these examples, the ability to apply the basic principles of environmental health, in combination with the ability to operationalize new scientific information into public health action, has been truly remarkable. This characteristic of our profession sets us apart as a unique and irreplaceable part of our national security.

Environmental health is a knowledge based profession. Ultimately, the most important product of our work is communities with a diminished burden of illness and injury. The primary tools of our craft are our minds, social skills, and a network of resources. It is important, as with any other craft, to sharpen and care for the tools that we rely upon. The fact that you are reading the *Journal of Environmental Health* suggests that you embrace the importance of continuing education. Thank you for your dedication to become a better version of yourself. I believe that it is critically important to our profession, and more importantly to public health, that we elevate our collective performance. Membership with the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) is a powerful way to access the sort of information, networking, and skill building resources necessary to strengthen our tools. This month I challenge you to find a colleague who is not a member and share with them the many ways that you benefit from participation in NEHA.

I recently had the pleasure of working with a regional public health training collaborative out of the University of Illinois at Chicago to better understand the training needs of our profession. This project employed an active learning approach with approximately 50

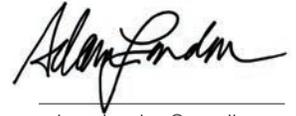
of our colleagues from leadership positions in local health departments in the Midwest. The study concluded that while some of the issues varied from state to state, there was a consensus about many things, including the need for better leadership training curricula, improved systems of data sharing, and timely toolkits for new and emerging issues.

Another study organized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in partnership with Baylor University and NEHA, seeks to identify further training needs. This study is called UNCOVER EH (Understand-

ing the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health, www.neha.org/uncover-eh). I urge you to participate in the surveying they will be conducting.

Studies such as these help organizations like ours better understand what kinds of trainings and resources you need to be ready for both the usual and unusual problems that our profession is expected to solve. I began this column comparing the ways in which environmental health sometimes feels like science fiction. The reality, however, is that our profession is firmly rooted

in science and in our ability to apply that science for society's benefit. On behalf of NEHA's staff and board of directors, I assure you that this association is committed to bringing you quality content in this *Journal* and in all our training products. Without further ado, please enjoy this issue! Hopefully it helps prepare you for some future mystery. 🐞



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Did You Know?

If interested in receiving a NEHA credential, review courses are coming up for the Certified Professional—Food Safety, Certified in Comprehensive Food Safety, and Food Safety Auditor credentials. Sign up to prepare for your credential and advance your career: www.neha.org/news-events/latest-news/neha's-upcoming-credential-review-courses.

SUPPORT THE NEHA ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION

The NEHA Endowment Foundation was established to enable NEHA to do more for the environmental health profession than its annual budget might allow. Special projects and programs supported by the foundation will be carried out for the sole purpose of advancing the profession and its practitioners.

Individuals who have contributed to the foundation are listed below by club category. These listings are based on what people have actually donated to the foundation—not what they have pledged. Names will be published under the appropriate category for one year; additional contributions will move individuals to a different category in the following year(s). For each of the categories, there are a number of ways NEHA recognizes and thanks contributors to the foundation. If you are interested in contributing to the Endowment Foundation, please call NEHA at 303.756.9090. You can also donate online at www.neha.org/about-neha/donate.

Thank you.

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Name in the Journal for one year and endowment pin.

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