

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

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## The Overton Window

**A** bark with no bite is simply noise. The Overton window is a theoretical construct that embodies the menu of governmental policies that the mainstream population finds acceptable or desirable. Throughout history, our politicians have instinctually recognized that the ideas most likely to get them elected reside within the window. Alternately, advocating for radical ideas outside the window leads to a stunted or marginal political trajectory. For example, Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and free college tuition are arguably outside the national window in 2020. Amending the contents or scope of the window requires a mood shift in society at-large. In other words, when the public demands free college tuition, a political “leader” will identify the issue as their own and become an advocate. Excuse my snark but this tendency might be labelled as “leading from behind.”

A subjective review of modern environmental health sentiment suggests that interests central to our profession might be edging toward the window, possibly offering us a once in a generation opportunity to advance values we and our communities hold dear. For example, 40% of Americans believe climate change is a crisis. Compared with five years ago, that percentage was less than 25%. In a 2018 survey, 60% of surveyed consumers reported that it is important that the food they consume is produced in a sustainable manner, an increase from 50% in 2017. Two out of three Americans believe their communities are vulnerable to a water crisis and most of the public believes that significant and immediate investments in

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water infrastructure are needed to avoid future water crises.

I could cite additional data but I sense you don't need convincing. How do we, if even possible, get our arms around the increasing interest and enthusiasm for environmental health and harness the energy to advance the profession? After all, we are, in the big scheme, a relatively tiny member-centered organization. Can we afford to stitch prevailing societal attitudes and beliefs in children's health, retail food, recreational waters, decentralized wastewater, indoor air quality, and emergency preparedness and response, among others, into a grand challenge? Are we confident these collective issues are in the window? Or, do we continue to take on individual matters one bite at a time, akin to our success with embedding environmental health language into the 2019 Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness and Advancing Innovation Act reauthorization? This pithy conversation is worthy of a round of carbonated beverages.

In recent years our association has been reasonably effective in getting itself invited to tables where meaningful conversations

centered on investments in the public health workforce and health systems are convened. Incremental progress achieved at these meetings is important. I sense, however, that we are potentially at a generational leapfrog moment where we can rebrand our profession as a solution to challenges most Americans agree upon. Here is the dreadful disclosure, I'm not sure what to do next.

There is a cacophony of letters to the editor, tweets, and Facebook and LinkedIn articles that in aggregate appear to be chasing the next great public health storyline. Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), lead service line replacement, opioid addiction, and cannabis are some of those storylines that immediately come to mind. This morning I scanned CNN, Fox, and the Washington Post. All three had lead stories on some dimension of environmental and public health. What I find missing is the thread that weaves these independent stories together. I feel the urge to map out a course that threads all the random stories into a single, compelling, and memorable narrative. During my years as a university professor, I knew that when students solved complex problems on their own, they felt a sense of pride. The truth is that I created the conditions under which they could be successful. Likewise, how do we create the conditions under which the country recognizes and communicates its desire for comprehensive environmental health services in a meaningful and productive fashion, as opposed to a series of one-off outrages that dominate the news cycle? A lot of bark with no bite.

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## DirectTalk

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I believe our past does not need to bury our future. We have tended to conquer a problem and then divest the solution to a new agency (e.g., water management districts, mosquito control districts, health department lead programs, etc.). Let us not employ the lather, rinse, repeat cycle of the past. I believe we need to think differently about the next steps, embrace new relationships that will stimulate our thinking, and reframe our position so it resonates with society. What do I mean?

There is no intrinsic value in the healing arts. Medicine? Zero. There is no intrinsic value in dentistry. There is no intrinsic value in the pharmaceutical sciences. Allied health professions? None. On the other hand, there is intrinsic value in public health. There is intrinsic value in environmental health. Why? Because at their roots, preventive professions are about what really matters. I believe we are about social justice—everyone's food should be safe to eat. We are about joy—everyone should enjoy recreational waters free from



*A window onto a sea of possibilities.  
Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

harmful chemicals or organisms. We are about peace—communities can live their lives knowing that we are at work to promote and protect their health, safety, and security. We are about love—everyone's child should attend a school free from recognized harm.

We are a profession identified by values that most people aspire to. Our nation, when it reflects on the value of science, wants us at the table. Our communities, when they articulate what is important to them, want us at the table. Let's make it easier for them to support us. Let us commit to packaging and socializing our professional essence in a manner where the outcome is that our society advocates for us, as opposed to us lobbying for attention in endless budget and social media cycles.

If you have ideas about the content of this column, please share them. Together we might start a national conversation on the future of our collective environment and health. Otherwise, I'm just another feral mutt yapping at pedestrians with the endless racket echoing through opened windows. 🐕

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