Tell Me—What Do You Do?

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In my first president’s message last July, I mused about making a career choice based upon what I knew and had learned about environmental health. “I revelled in the thought of preventing or mitigating illness and injury while promoting well-being and balance within a healthy environment.” As I learned more about environmental health, I realized the related body of knowledge and science, not to mention the scope of practice, was enormous and evolving. As a result, and throughout the years, I often struggled to concisely answer a common question in social and professional circles, “What do you do?” It seems a simple and succinct articulation evades me and by extension, the profession, whenever I hear myself or others in the field attempt to describe the nature of our jobs. The NEHA board of directors recently took occasion to address the quandary!

In spring 2012 under tutelage of then-President Mel Knight, a committee was appointed to again take up the question, “Who are we and what do we do?” This attempt was to be framed in a relevant and contemporary context and include the definition and scope of practice for environmental health. Committee appointees included a number of esteemed environmental health leaders: Keith Krinn, NEHA past president and Columbus Health environmental health administrator; Alicia Enriquez Collins, NEHA president elect and Sacramento County environmental health deputy chief; Dr. Carolyn Hester Harvey, NEHA first vice president and professor of environmental health; Adam London, Sandra Long, and David Riggs, NEHA regional vice presidents (RVPs) and local environmental health practitioners; and Dr. Michael Besisi, senior associate dean for academic affairs at The Ohio State University and director of the environmental health is the science and practice of promoting optimal human health, well-being, and preventing illness and injury by
- identifying and evaluating sources of threat to human health and the environment and
- limiting exposures to physical, chemical, and biological agents in air, water, soil, food, and other media that may adversely affect human health or the environment.

An environmental health professional is a practitioner with appropriate training and credentials whose duties are to lead, administer, implement, teach, or research environmental health activities.

The scope of duties include many of the essential services of public health and may include the following:
- air quality and noise;
- disaster sanitation and emergency planning†;
- food protection;
- general environmental health‡;
- hazardous materials;
- housing;
- institutions and licensed establishments;
- occupational safety and health;
- potable water;
- radiation protection;
- solid and hazardous wastes;
- statutes, regulations, and standards;
- swimming pools and recreational facilities;
- vectors, pests, and poisonous plants; and
- wastewater.

‡General environmental health includes investigating, auditing, inspecting, sampling, and measuring levels of agents and factors in environmental media; controlling contamination; applying environmental microbiology; and reviewing construction and land use plans.
Center for Public Health Practice. The work group was expertly chaired by U.S. Public Health Service Captain (Ret.) John Steward, NEHA Region 7 vice president, who is currently with the Institute of Public Health at Georgia State University and formerly of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The group was specifically charged with providing considered revisions to the definition of environmental health and its scope of practice with a contemporary inclination.

Over ensuing months, the work group reviewed and analyzed many definitions of environmental health. Some were opinions published by iconic leaders in the practice and others were memorialized in government documents or academic literature. Once the literature search was complete, information was sifted and a revised definition of environmental health and its scope of practice were derived (see sidebar).

As members of NEHA and as vested and invested members and practitioners of the profession, I invite you to play a crucial role in the evolution of environmental health by assisting to articulate and memorialize a contemporary and relevant definition and scope of practice. Please go to www.surveymonkey.com/s/26FT75S and provide your input. The proposed definition and scope of practice are outlined, opportunity for feedback exists, and of course, you can even suggest we stand with current definitions. Please make sure you have provided feedback by May 1, 2013. Upon analysis of results, the NEHA board will adopt a revised definition and scope of practice for environmental health or take no action, allowing current articulations to stand.

I would again like to say thank you to RVP John Steward and his committee for their hard work and I look forward to a great deal of feedback so you can help us help you tell others what you do!

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Did You Know?

NEHA’s currently approved definition of environmental health is, “Environmental health and protection refer to protection against environmental factors that may adversely impact human health or the ecological balances essential to long-term human health and environmental quality, whether in the natural or man-made environment.”

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