Good Night, Sleep Tight, Don’t Let the Bed Bugs Bite

Each of these familiar expressions has one thing in common: a link to environmental health is in each of their origins. After researching several idioms, I found it interesting to note the varied stories, controversies, and folklore involved. It was a challenge to verify the true origin of each expression; nonetheless, it was an educational and entertaining exercise. If you find yourself in an environment where endless metaphors and workplace clichés are used throughout the day, I think you will appreciate this discussion. I don’t think most of us question the origin of such common expressions, but it is fun to reflect upon those that have had an environmental health foundation.

As I was discussing these snippets with NEHA colleagues, we agreed that this is yet one more way to connect with the public in our day-to-day activities. They can provide opportunities to share a bit of history, a bit of folklore, or a story, and continue to educate members of the public about what we do and who we are as environmental health professionals. This column is intended to share some colloquialisms with the hope that these will prompt further conversation and even serve as an “ice-breaker” for you in a given situation.

The frequent discussion of foodborne disease outbreaks, bed bugs, disaster response, and other high-profile environmental health topics has prompted me to think about how we often seek ways to connect with the general public about what we do as environmental health professionals. For many years, we have been subjected to unfortunate terms such as “the invisible profession.” With the field of environmental health encompassing so many aspects of our lives and our environment and making headline news, it is perplexing to think that what we do may still be unknown and unrecognized by the general public. Environmental health is actually at the tip of our tongues quite frequently.

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In this Journal of Environmental Health issue, you will find a feature article about a bed bug infestation in an office building. Like many environmental health issues, bed bugs have reemerged as nuisance pests and have entered a variety of our living environments, including hotel rooms, homes, college dormitories, airplanes, cars, buses, passenger trains, and workplaces. Taxicabs and police squad cars have been especially implicated.

Many of us fondly recall our parents’ nighttime blessing each night, “Good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite.” Many believe “sleep tight” is linked to mattress designs prior to the invention of box springs. Ropes were tied firmly to the bed frame underneath the mattress to keep it tight. It is difficult to determine, however, whether the antique design of mattresses and bed frames and the term “sleep tight” are connected. It has also been said that the term referred to wearing tight clothing at night so as to keep the bed bugs from biting. We know scientifically that this is not a preventative measure for preventing bed bug bites, but it’s not hard to imagine that this might have been one of those old world remedies so dearly believed and passed down by our ancestors. It’s also interesting to note that the words “tight” or “tightly” were used in the 1800s to mean soundly or properly. While not able to pinpoint this phrase’s origin, we can clearly see the association between the home environment and good health—primitive healthy homes concepts that we continue to carry on in our work in ensuring homes are safe from pests, chemicals, and other hazards.
Raining Cats and Dogs
There are several theories for this one. One theory that is likely false, but worth mentioning, is that dogs would retreat into thatch roofs and then be washed out during rain storms. The implication is that after flood waters receded, dead animals would be found in the streets. Because it would be difficult and unlikely for a dog or cat to burrow into a thatch roof that is angled and properly maintained, this explanation is doubtful.

Playwright Jonathan Swift wrote “Complete Collection of Gentle and Ingenious Conversation,” a satire on the conversations of the upper class, in the early 1700s. One of the characters in the satire forecasts that it will “rain cats and dogs.” Swift also authored “City Shower” in 1710, which described floods that occurred after heavy rains. The resulting floods left behind dead animals in the streets, which may have also led to the popular use of the phrase.

It may be that the origin of this phrase wasn’t based upon environmental health, but as environmental health professionals, we understand the public health threat of dead animal carcasses as well as the other environmental health threats caused by heavy flooding. Flooding has become an ever-occurring disaster and environmental health services are called upon when this type of disaster strikes.

Ring Around the Rosie
“Ring-a-ring o’ roses, a pocket full of posies, ashes! Ashes! We all fall down!” This Mother Goose nursery rhyme was first put into print in 1881. The idea that this innocent nursery rhyme makes reference to the bubonic plague (caused by Yersinia pestis) or the “Black Death” that struck Europe in the mid-1300s is often rejected. Folklore or not, I believe it is an interesting and an extremely dark reflection of the disease that took a devastating toll on a population in the 14th century and reemerged in London in 1665. The “ring around the rosie” makes reference to the red buboes around the neck of an infected person (swollen lymph nodes); “posies” refer to the herbs or flowers that people carried in their pockets and physicians of the era placed in the beaks of their masks in hopes that it would mask the odor or would protect them from the disease; and “ashes” refer to the incineration of bodies of those who succumbed to the disease. “At-choo” can be found in alternate versions of the rhyme (instead of “ashes”) and refers to a sneeze that was the sign of coming illness. “All fall down” describes the sudden death that occurs within days of onset of illness. It wasn’t until 1894 that the disease was conclusively connected to fleas carried by rats. Even today we still see outbreaks of plague and environmental health is often called upon to investigate these outbreaks.

Mad as a Hatter
This phrase is believed to have originated sometime in the early 1800s and is associated with felt hat makers. Merccurous nitrate was used in curing felt for hats and the prolonged exposure to the vapors caused mercury poisoning. Symptoms include muscular tremors and twitching with hallucinations and psychosis for advanced cases. This brings to mind the fictional character “Mad Hatter” from Lewis Carroll’s classic children’s book, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Fortunately, strict regulations have been put into place in North America and Europe to protect workers handling such compounds. Environmental health professionals have played a key role in ensuring that this type of colloquialism will never occur again through their endeavors in making workplaces safe.

Wrong End of the Stick or Short End of the Stick
In ancient Rome, the public toilets were communal and included an elongated bench with several holes carved in it. The communal toilet was a gathering place for people of all ages and genders to not only take care of their physiological needs, but also catch up on politics and local gossip. Sticks with sea-sponge tips would be used in place of modern-day toilet paper. The sponge was rinsed between uses. If a person wasn’t paying close attention when the stick was being passed along, however, he or she could grab the “wrong end of the stick.” I am not sure how this saying evolved into “short end of the stick,” but we can easily realize the environmental health ramifications of grabbing the wrong end! This ancient practice should make us all very grateful for modern plumbing and sanitation practices (both of which environmental health continues to strive to ensure). In thinking of the stick and sponge method, I couldn’t help but ask myself, “What was wrong with using fig leaves?”

Nitpicking
Are you a meticulous and detail-oriented person? If so, how often have you been called “nitpicky”? I would suggest this descriptor can be accepted as a compliment and viewed as an attribute for environmental health professionals. Nitpicking is a term used to define the removal of nits or the eggs of parasites (usually lice) from a host’s hair or fur. This was a common method employed to remove nits in the early 1900s prior to medicated shampoo products. It is also a common practice used among primates while they are grooming one another. It is to the public’s benefit that environmental health professionals are “nit-picky” when it comes to their responsibilities of interpreting regulations, reviewing official documents, and conducting assessments and investigations. So, while the origin of the word may be a bit gross, I say that we should wear the label of “nitpicky” with pride!

In Summary
These are just a few colloquialisms from the past in use today that have an environmental health origin. My goal was simply to provide a sampling to provoke thought about making a connection between familiar phrases already in our vernacular and what we do as environmental health professionals. Many other expressions are in use today, which may or may not have validity behind them. What other colloquialisms can you name with an environmental health connection? What popular phrases used now have that connection? Imagine what future phrases environmental health may inspire. I invite you to send me an e-mail with your responses, mythical findings, and creative ideas.

At the start of this column I mentioned how we have been perceived as an invisible profession. In my personal opinion, we are not invisible, but ever present in both the old and the new world. The longevity of these colloquialisms and their environmental health connections is testament to the importance of our work. Perhaps sharing these explanations with the public when we have the opportunity can help them understand how extensive and vital our role is in protecting public health and our environment, especially in our local communities.