A Call for the Initiation of a National Environmental Health Network

I'm convinced we have entered into a new era where established and emerging technology can enable an exponential expansion of networking opportunities for environmental health practitioners.

I have had extensive experience with environmental health information sharing systems, and these have included LISTSERVs, e-mail distribution lists, chat sites, and message centers. Nearly all systems have been useful, but their utility and utilization has been limited. Shortcomings have ranged from too little participation to an overwhelming volume of information. Many systems uniquely serve a single program area (e.g., air, water, food safety, etc.), while others attempt to broadly cover all areas of public health. More than once I have enthusiastically signed on to a system to later see a decline in interest and participation by myself and others.

I’ve now grown to believe that the traditional mechanism of building and maintaining distribution lists to push information out to recipients is no longer the best way to network and share information. A network that allows users to selectively pull in relevant information is much more efficient and productive. The successful environmental health networks of the future will not resemble the e-mail LISTSERVs or password-protected agency data repositories, but will look more like the more accessible social and professional networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn.

Just a few years ago it was a difficult task to efficiently search for information on environmental health practices, tools, and programs. Google and other search engines have revolutionized the access to information to the extent that the next task will be to better organize massive volumes of information to suit our unique and specific needs.

I was recently at a federal agency-sponsored work group session in which the sponsoring agency had created a Web site that was clearly being underutilized. The agency had hoped that environmental health professionals and their agencies would be posting useful information and tools, but very little new content was being posted and very few practitioners were even aware of the site. This approach is a common strategy, but in most cases it is programmed to fail.
We need to adopt new strategies and utilize a technique that has historically served us well—learning from the experiences and successes of others. We know that modern social and professional networking sites have attracted the active participation of millions worldwide, including many environmental health agencies and practitioners. The next logical step will be to see what we can learn from these successful systems and incorporate key elements into our prospective initiatives.

I can envision that in the near future environmental health professionals will be able to more easily network with colleagues to seek out best practices, innovative tools, and peer support. An environmental health specialist may wish to find out if other jurisdictions have implemented a body art ordinance. An environmental health manager might be interested in obtaining fee schedules that have allowed many environmental health programs to recover some or all of their costs. A sanitarian could become part of an interactive group that is developing the environmental health role in sustainable land use planning. There could be a repository established for the development and distribution of environmental health smartphone applications—yes, there’s an app for that!

Environmental health professionals have an interest and need for all of these things and more. Most governmental agencies and many private entities have an interest in efficient and effective access to the community of environmental health professionals. The participants, the tools, and the applications already exist but must be linked in a manner that eases access and utility. I personally believe NEHA is positioned to be a key organization to provide leadership in establishing a national professional network for environmental health practitioners. Other professional organizations and governmental agencies cover some elements of environmental health practice, but NEHA uniquely has the broad-based membership and resources that encompass the breadth of our entire field. NEHA members represent governmental agencies, the private sector, and academia. NEHA has members in every one of the United States, plus many international members. NEHA has appointed technical advisors supporting 30 environmental health program areas that cover virtually every aspect of environmental health practice.

NEHA has established alliances with other capable partners that collectively enable the necessary capacity to undertake the leadership on a significant initiative of this size and scope. I believe that the technology is now available to meet this unquestioned need. I invite you to join me in advocating for the initiation of a national environmental health network. To repeat an often-quoted line: “If not now, when? If not us, who?”

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