

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

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## Oh, Atlanta

There is nothing quite like the taste of a fresh Georgia peach. The fragrance and flavor have a way of clinging to you long after the fruit is devoured. This lasting impression is also true for Georgia's influence on environmental practice and public health. This reflection is particularly relevant for February 2017 when I represented your interests at two Atlanta-based conferences and a reverse site visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Allow me the privilege to provide you with a quick review of the key outcomes of my Georgia adventures, beginning with the most nationally visible event—the Climate and Health Summit sponsored by Al Gore. The 1-day program attracted national attention in large measure because Gore stepped in (and up) to host the Climate and Health Summit.

The Carter Center provided an appropriate venue for the conference, punctuated by an appearance and brief remarks from Jimmy Carter. But the star of the show was Gore, who provided the audience with a compelling rationale for convening the conference. The “who’s who” of the climate research world presented scientific findings about the disturbing changes to our planet, the implications for our health and food supply, and the possible paths forward to address what is increasingly becoming a concern of global proportions.

While I was very pleased to represent you at the conference, I had heard most of the presentations at prior events and there was precious little in the way of new or emerging science presented. What was different, however, was the collective show of force

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from the allied health professions. The conference was widely covered in the national press, which demonstrated what we in the health sector can achieve if we search for areas to collaborate.

Ironically, it was the last speaker who made the entire day worthwhile. The presenter was once employed by a conservative think tank, but had since joined the folds of those who are alarmed by the implications of growing environmental change. He encouraged the audience to stop talking to people who agree with the public health community and to increase efforts to engage the conservative political elite who are undecided about the implications of climate and health. He described what he perceived as effective approaches and strategies that might compel moderate political leaders. He went on to emphasize that we should not overstate the certainty of our science and importantly, how

to frame our health messages in the context of risk management.

Shortly after the Climate and Health Summit, our Government Affairs Director Joanne Zurcher and I completed targeted appointments with public health officials on the CDC Roybal campus. We met individually with CDC Acting Director Dr. Anne Schuchat; Dr. Stephen Redd, director of the Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response; and the leadership of the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (NCEZID).

The appointments with Drs. Schuchat and Redd were impressive in that both professionals were attentive and inquisitive about how the environmental health profession creates and delivers value for the health enterprise. Both seemed genuinely surprised at the notion that we are the single largest and most geographically distributed segment of the public health workforce. Dr. Redd took note that in some places, especially in rural and frontier areas of the country, environmental health is the local health department. The importance of this realization is highlighted in the combat of Zika in the U.S.

The meeting with NCEZID leadership was followed by a center-wide “Value of Working With NEHA” seminar delivered by yours truly. I highlighted the critical role environmental health professionals play in protecting the American public against waterborne and foodborne diseases, and our profession's vital role in emerging infectious and vectorborne diseases. I received a question at

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the end of the seminar on how NEHA and CDC can partner more effectively. My response reflected the notion that throwing small amounts of money across the public health world in support of environmental health was reinforcing the balkanization of the profession. It is time to fund NEHA as the single, most effective partner that can reach and build the capacity of both the public and private environmental health sector.

The 2-day CDC Zika summit was thought provoking. The conference was invitation only and was convened adjacent to CDC's Emergency Operations Center. Speakers representing the pest control industry, U.S. and foreign public health officials, researchers, and funders such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation delivered a wide range of presentations aimed at reducing Zika risk in the U.S.

The Zika situation in the U.S. is complex. An estimated 5,000 cases have been reported,



*David Dyjack with CDC Acting Director Anne Schuchat. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

with 221 transmitted locally, primarily in Texas and Florida. The vector, the *Aedes* mosquito, is profoundly local. It loves to breed in very small vessels of water, making efforts to control breeding sites very difficult. Many innovative approaches to track, target, and act on juvenile and adult mosquitoes are under consideration. These approaches

include the deployment of genetically modified sterile males, aerial spraying, and basic, good old fashion housekeeping measures that reduce breeding sites.

The resounding implications are that Zika is likely here to stay in the U.S. Thus, the message is clear: sustained financial investment in vector control programs is a strategic national priority. At this conference and in other venues, I have repeatedly advocated for the environmental health workforce and its valuable role in minimizing the risk associated with vectors. Who better to work on Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, or chikungunya?

All public health roads lead to Atlanta. Our commitment is to show up and speak up on behalf of you and the entire profession. February 2017 was a busy month indeed! 🐜

*Dave*

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# Did You Know?

For the first time in its 80-year history, NEHA has released an Annual Report for fiscal year 2016. The progressive and interactive format of the Annual Report allows readers to view videos and click on links that take them directly to online content for a richer, in-depth experience. View the Annual Report at [http://neha.org/sites/default/files/flipping\\_book/annual-report-2016/index.html](http://neha.org/sites/default/files/flipping_book/annual-report-2016/index.html).



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