

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

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Alchemy

If you want things to remain the same, then everything must change.

Conference calls at 6 a.m. are heinous, unless you are connecting with inspired colleagues from around the planet. The virtual relationships I maintain with professors Kirstin Ross, Toni Hannelly, Graeme Mitchell, Henry Dawson, and Matilde Rodriguez help keep me grounded, though I wish the biweekly sessions were scheduled at a more humane North American hour.

Our international breakfast club struggles with, and share ideas around, contemporary environmental health issues. Last week we discussed regulatory approaches to third-party food delivery, the vaccination performance of representative countries, and the mind-bending changes to the academic enterprise. The postpandemic new normal for university students is astounding. In some major colleges and universities there is *no expectation that in-class lectures or exams will ever return*. I ask you to reflect on that for a moment. Additionally, over the last year, many U.S.-based public health academic programs have suspended the GRE admission requirement. Anecdotal evidence suggests most will no longer require it. Who would have figured?

Societal shocks and stress can bring clarity to many enterprises and provide an opportunity to rethink or reconsider what is a traditional or customary practice. I recall with pride having an abstract accepted for the September 1997 International Occupational Health Association conference in Crans-Montana, Switzerland. The glee of presenting

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my research on the international stage was neutralized by the untimely death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Her passing occurred a few days before my departure for Europe and coincided with a personal visit I planned to bundle with my relatives in Richmond, which is just outside of London.

After arriving in the UK, I, like many others, made a pilgrimage to Kensington Palace to spend a few minutes to honor the life of a woman who lived her life in service, with emphasis on the public health scourge HIV/AIDS. The sight of tens of thousands of flower bouquets left in her honor are seared into my memory. If the life of one of the most famous and influential people in the planet can be snuffed out in a heartbeat, then there should be *no expectation that the constructs of my professional life as I know them will remain usual and customary into perpetuity*.

The current construct of our profession will inevitably undergo a renaissance, much as COVID-19 has recalibrated the academic universe, or a car crash can affect a monar-

chy. As I glance into the crystal ball, I sense some tsunamis headed in our direction. Please allow to share a few thoughts on what I believe is in store for us.

Climate change might reframe our core professional lives. The sudden stratospheric warming in February 2021 gave rise to the plunge and widening of the jet stream that devastated Texas, costing the state a cool \$90 billion, according to informed estimates. Burst water pipes, mold, and a host of other environmental health challenges were created. Three European countries broke all-time temperature records in March 2021. This year was the earliest peak bloom of Kyoto's cherry blossoms in the 1,200 years of records that have been kept. Germany and the Netherlands recorded all-time high temperatures for the month of March.

You might ask, "So what?" Vectors such as ticks and mosquitoes will continue to evolve and migrate, presenting illness and disease in places unaccustomed to them. Drinking water distribution systems will increasingly require new and more sophisticated treatment and attention as ambient temperatures create ideal conditions for biofilm. Energy efficient buildings will exacerbate indoor air quality challenges for the world's population who generally spend 90% of their time indoors. Harmful algal blooms and warming temperatures will devastate coral reefs and transform the hospitality industry. Environmental health professionals might spend more time inspecting and validating carbon scrubbing systems and analyzing the chemi-

continued on page 44

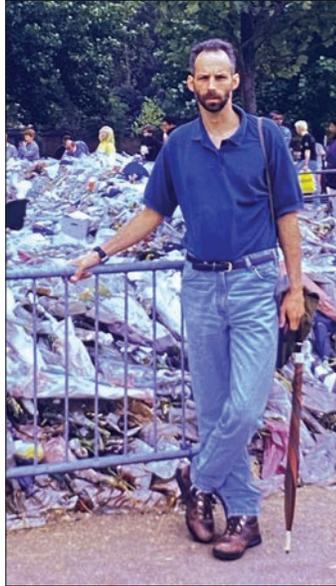
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cals in the air that were suspended in the stratosphere by well-intentioned engineers hoping to reflect solar energy back into space.

The decisions implemented today about food will introduce new challenges. A couple days ago, New Mexico and New York reportedly made the decision to liberalize the consumption of cannabis. It is just a matter of time before every state is seduced by the prospect of new tax revenue and follow suit in legalization. Edibles will be regulated. Third-party food delivery systems will be regulated. Virtual restaurants inspections will become standard operating procedure. The self-reporting of foodborne illness by individuals to nongovernmental sites will be the norm.

We will discover that 5G represents a health hazard to the public. Playground tire crumbs will be identified as a risk to children. Urban noise ordinances will become more common. New regulations will appear aimed at minimizing vehicle traffic and attendant emissions in urban cores. Active management of food waste will be introduced. We will discover new cancer clusters.

The proposed infrastructure bill winding its way from the White House to Congress has the potential to change the country's architecture. Renewable energy, mass transportation, and active living arrangements will become the cornerstones of our national way of life. Our inspection data will increasingly be used for learning and less for regulatory functions. We will become threaded to the clinical universe. Organizations, including our own, have already or will become more inclined to adopt results-only work environments. These developments will introduce chaos, new expecta-



Dr. Dyjack at Kensington Palace (left) and flowers honoring the passing of Diana, Princess of Wales, (right) in September 1997. Photos courtesy of David Dyjack.

tions, and open the doors to new ways of thinking about us, our profession, and the world around us.

These are my predictions and nothing more. What I believe is that every workplace is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets. I would like to think that we can create our preferred future. Let us initiate the process of describing the environmental health program in the year 2100 and begin the arduous process of dreaming and communicating our vision, one that ensures healthy communities, healthy environments, and empowered professionals.

I envision a new, revitalized, and integrated approach to credentialing so we can escape the annual circus of state attacks on the credentialing enterprise. Representative Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan) reintroduced the

Environmental Health Workforce Act of 2021 on April 19, 2021. If passed, it will direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to compare health outcomes in states that require a credentialed workforce with those states that do not. Here is our opportunity to bend the arc of the profession. The future is now.

Let us not default to someone else or some other organization to describe the future of our profession. We possess the ability to turn our raw talents into a precious commodity. If we desire to remain a strong and influential profession, we will need to change everything about us. 🐼

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Did You Know?

Assembled in 2020, the NEHA History Project Task Force was charged to study and review the rich history of NEHA and the environmental health field, as well as make that history available to all. A NEHA History Project webpage is now posted that highlights and shares the work of the task force, including an overview of the task force, an online virtual museum of artifacts from environmental health's past, electronic access to the "NEHA Green Book" that presents the history of NEHA's first 50 years, and much more. Check it out at www.neha.org/neha-history-project.