

► **DirectTalk**

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## Exploring Secrets by the Sea

**F**luorescent green threads appeared out of nowhere in the predawn blue hour. Alarming they seemed to be making a direct line for me. When they breached my personal space, perhaps 100 yards off, I was able to make out the vague outline of galloping dogs. The dayglow threads were collars and the collars were attached to large Doberman Pinschers. A calm, distant voice of a woman called out and the canines were brought to a heel. So much for a salubrious morning jog on South Carolina's Myrtle Beach, where I was attending and speaking at the American Public Health Association (APHA) state affiliate meeting this spring.

This conference was the first I have attended in 2022, and it was wonderful to connect in person. The program was nurturing from multiple perspectives. First, the A list of speakers was notable: state and local leadership, philanthropy, academia, practitioners, community organizers, and students, among others. The agenda was equally eclectic, covering the vast landscape of the public health enterprise. I was the sole voice of environmental public health. I had been requested to speak to the contributions of the environmental health profession to public health. Frankly, it was an easy but politically loaded assignment. You see, the South Carolina legislature is contemplating creation of a Department of Behavioral and Public Health that would exclude environmental public health. The current South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control and the South Carolina Board of Health and Environmental Control would be abolished

*Environmental public health is the backbone of public health.*

under the proposed initiative. Environmental health services would be, under the plan, fragmented into agriculture and a separate department of environmental services.

"Environmental public health is the backbone of public health." I hit hard right out of the gate as I addressed the audience. There is an increasing body of evidence that a wet market in Wuhan, China, was the source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. We estimate that 75% of infectious disease today arise from zoonotic origins, and that the human desire for animal protein presents the single largest risk for the next pandemic. The Ebola virus, tularemia, and brucellosis are other examples. Think retail food safety, the single largest responsibility of most local environmental public health practitioners. What happens in the meat markets of Africa and China affects public health in the U.S. A U.S.-based think tank produced a guidance document in March 2022 on how best to live with endemic COVID-19. Environmental health features prominently in the document, with an emphasis on indoor air quality.

This conference was primarily attended by members and supporters of the local APHA affiliate. I reminded the audience that APHA was created in 1872 by a sanitarian, Dr. Stephen Smith, to primarily address water, sanitation, and hygiene. Specifically, much of the work early in APHA's history was focused on environmental health issues such as conditions that exacerbated tuberculosis, contaminated milk, and air pollution. I shared the cover of the March 2020 *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)* that headlined a National Environmental Health Association research article focused on our workforce. If our profession is not central to public health, why would the prestigious *AJPH* highlight our publication?

From there I picked up momentum as I described the core functions of public health—assessment, assurance, and policy development. Each of these pillars have environmental health embedded into them. I pointed out that environmental health is the second largest part of the public health workforce. Finally, I shared the 2012 report that describes environmental health as a foundational public health service. Compelling evidence of the centrality of environmental health to public health abounds.

My presentation began to click as I described how South Carolina is affected by a variety of environmental health challenges that will impact the health, safety, and financial prosperity of the state. I reviewed how the state has endemic Lyme disease, harmful algal blooms, droughts, flooding, and wildfires. Which pro-

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profession plays a central role in the anticipation and control of these diseases and conditions?

I felt it was important to share our experience at our 2017 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was there that we inserted a last-minute session on the opioid epidemic. The session was on the last day of the conference, just before the final closing program. Much to my surprise, it was standing room only. I was impressed by the replies when I inquired why so many of us elected to attend this educational session. Many of our members were involved in drug take-back programs, needle exchange programs, or had been reassigned to work on opioids. This example is yet another of the value the profession delivers on behalf of society.

I wrapped up my presentation with some vintage “Dave storytelling” to personify our association members and to remind the attendees that no matter how South Carolina elected officials decide to parse out and administer its public health services, the environmental health profession will continue to create and deliver impactful interventions and recommendations on behalf of state residents. I closed by sharing my belief that environmental health professionals are meta-



*Environmental public health at the dawn of a new era in South Carolina. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.*

leaders and that the profession is uniquely constructed to bridge the spaces among the public health professions. We have the ability and insight to describe and prescribe preventive and corrective measures. When given the opportunity, we can compress morbidity, reducing the cost of disease and exposure to society. We are hotbeds of innovation, pro-

viding targeted solutions in profoundly local public health environments.

The decision to reorganize public health and environmental health in South Carolina is theirs to make. I trust the elected official's commitment and wisdom to do what is in the best interest of their residents. My commentary is solely dedicated to the proposition that environmental public health is an important contributor to the state's economy and health status.

As I write this column, the BA.2 COVID variant now comprises over 50% of new cases in the U.S. and the Food and Drug Administration just approved a new round of boosters for individuals over 50 years. I ask everyone to use discretion as you make personal and professional decisions on the in-person events you elect to attend. I understand the desire to get out, as I did to attend this conference. I also understand that each of us needs to search out opportunities to remind our professional networks of the value we deliver to society. One of the comments from Dr. Jimmie Smith, a conference presenter from Georgia, rings true to me: “We must show up and speak up to make things right.” 🐼

*Dave*

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