An Evolution of Environmental Health: NEHA Adapts and Embraces Change

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Have you ever read the book, *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson, MD? It is a simple story about two mice and two miniature people who are faced with making choices once their cheese supply within a maze is exhausted. The cheese represents something they all want and need for survival. The mice, Sniff and Scurry, venture without hesitation into the maze to find more cheese and the two other characters, Hem and Haw, hang back and discuss and debate what they should do next. The mice quickly find their pot of gold while the people struggle with making a move as they are paralyzed by their fear of the unknown and their lack of courage to take the next steps necessary for survival. The status quo in their case would set them up for certain failure—they would surely starve.

Some would say that the mice were too hasty; they moved quickly without a lot of thought behind their decision to take the risks of perhaps getting lost or not finding more nourishment. Their willingness and readiness to act, however, led them to a successful outcome. Eventually, Haw leaves Hem and reconnects with the mice who share their bounty—a life’s supply of gourmet cheese.

I recalled this story recently while reflecting on the many changes I’ve experienced in my personal and professional life during the past several months. Its lessons of taking necessary action for survival also brought to my mind the changes our profession has endured. Over the brief history of the public health discipline there are many examples of individuals who made a difference—those who identified a particular public health problem, quickly proceeded to investigate the problem, and sought interventions to save lives and/or protect our environment.

Here are a few examples of notable public health figures who have acted in the face of a problem and had significant impact on environmental health practices:

**Dr. John Snow (1813–1858)** is considered the Father of Modern Epidemiology for his quest to discover how cholera was transmitted and his theory that it was transmitted by contaminated drinking water.

**Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine (1862–1954)** worked to prevent the spread of tuberculosis by his campaigns to replace common drinking cups with paper cups (especially on railroads and public buildings) and promoting the slogan, “Don’t spit on the sidewalk.” In 1905, he invented the flyswatter to help combat the spread of disease.

**Dr. Sara Josephine Baker (1873–1945)** was an American physician notable for making contributions to public health, especially in New York City. She is best known for her part in the epidemiological investigation of Typhoid Mary (Mary Mallon). She tracked Mary down twice and was helpful in getting her quarantined. Dr. Baker was also responsible for vastly improving hygiene within the immigrant communities of Hell’s Kitchen. At that time, hand washing education was severely lacking.

**Dr. Thomas Palix (1916–2006)** is considered the Father of the DPD test. He developed analytical methods using the indicator diethyl para phenylene diamine (DPD) that many of us use in our day-to-day work to test and ensure appropriate chlorine residuals in water supplies and swimming pools.

Today, we are often faced with difficulties that challenge the survival of our programs. While these challenges are not unique to environmental health, they cause us to look for creative ways to continue our quest to achieve greater environmental health protection. Major funding cuts in programs and decreases in our workforce are two major challenges. As leaders and problem solvers, we look for innovative ways to sustain programs—whether it is by way of more fee-for-service programs, grant funding, reorganization, and/or the use of technology.

In the midst of our challenges with supporting our traditional programs, we grapple with the emerging environmental health implications of climate change, green chemistry, bioterrorism, all-hazards emergency preparedness, and environmental justice as well as responding to changes in public health regulations on menu labeling.
requirements, trans fat bans, and genetically modified foods. The “think globally and act locally” sustainability trend has created issues related to community supported agriculture; home preparation of foods for retail sale (cottage foods); expanded products at farm stands; and urban farming, poultry raising, and herd sharing. With so many changes at the local, state, and national level, it can be daunting just to try to keep up with the new risks to public health. As environmental health leaders and as the largest environmental health association in the nation, it is critical that we lead not follow by staying ahead of trends and emerging issues. These challenges and changes pose an opportunity for us to lead as a profession and to adapt quickly. NEHA’s team of highly qualified technical advisors provide advice to both the NEHA staff and our board as we advocate for enhanced environmental health, prepare for our educational conferences each year, and publish the highly regarded Journal of Environmental Health. These advisors are NEHA’s key to adaptation and survival; their expertise is critical as we react to the challenges and changes our profession is experiencing.

Unlike Hem and Haw, NEHA quickly adapts and continues to serve our membership as changes occur in our profession and in industry. When Haw finally took the initiative to explore the maze on his own, he wrote bits of advice on the walls of the maze as he hoped his friend Hem would be close behind: “Movement in a new direction helps you find new cheese.” “If you do not change, you can become extinct.” Fortunately, Haw learned a lesson from his earlier lack of initiative and courage. When finding the cheese palace, he did not allow complacency to overtake him and he continued to explore the maze in order to remain familiar with his environment and aware of his options should another emergency occur. Like the mice in this short story, NEHA is thriving and is prepared for changes, new challenges, and new opportunities.

I encourage you to contact your regional vice president if you would like input on an issue that is impacting your state or your area. Contact information for your board members and technical advisors can be found on NEHA’s Web site at www.neha.org/about/neha.html and within this issue on page 60.

In the book, Who Moved My Cheese? by Spencer Johnson, MD, the character Haw writes several lessons learned on the wall of the maze following his successful quest for a new supply of cheese. Can we relate any of these simple lessons to environmental health or to our everyday lives?

**The Handwriting on the Wall**

- Change happens
- They keep moving the cheese
- Anticipate change
- Get ready for the cheese to move
- Monitor change
- Smell the cheese often so you know when it is getting old
- Adapt to change quickly
- The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you can enjoy new cheese
- Change
- Move with the cheese
- Enjoy change!
- Savor the adventure and enjoy the taste of new cheese!
- Be ready to change quickly and enjoy it again and again
- They keep moving the cheese

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**Become a NEHA Member!**

**Why?** Because the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) is the only association at the intersection of the environmental and health professions! Nowhere else will you find representatives from all areas of environmental health and protection, including terrorism and all-hazards preparedness, food protection, hazardous waste, onsite wastewater, air and drinking water quality, epidemiology, management, etc.—in both the public and private sectors.

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