

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

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Time Under Tension

The refrain “time under tension” echoes in my mind like a bat in search of prey. The phrase is commonly employed in strength and conditioning training and is a reference to how long a muscle is under strain during exercise. Reportedly, the longer the stress, the better the result. Except, I am *not* talking about my fitness regimen. I *am* talking about the current time in U.S. society and the state of national tension expressing itself in the form of a general lack of civility. As our association is increasingly seen as a national and influential voice on health issues, our profession is not immune to the winds that buffet our country and its people. I would like to share a couple examples of what this situation looks like in practice.

Every 2 years our annual conference is convened in partnership with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Two years ago, then HUD Secretary Julián Castro spoke at our 2016 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition. This year, HUD Secretary Dr. Ben Carson was scheduled to speak at our AEC in Anaheim, California. NEHA’s relationship with HUD is an important one. HUD provides funds to state and local governments to develop cost-effective ways to reduce lead-based paint hazards and other risks associated with the built environment. They are a critical player in the environmental health landscape, particularly for children and people living in poverty.

I was disappointed by the hate that quickly revealed itself on our Facebook page when Dr. Carson’s proposed presence at the 2018 AEC was announced. Some of the hate was

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racial. Some was historical. Some was political. Some of our members threatened to end their relationships with us. Hate has never solved any problem and has no place in the NEHA network.

Our partnership with HUD leverages both organizations on behalf of national health and safety. NEHA is a nonprofit and, by law, a bipartisan organization. The presence of a political appointee at our AEC is not to be construed as a NEHA endorsement. The political beliefs and ideologies of AEC speakers are their own. The purpose of the AEC is to provide an opportunity to engage in full and spirited dialogue on environmental health issues. We offer this opportunity to speak to AEC attendees on issues germane to the profession regardless of political party or agenda of the current political administration.

The second situation developed as an outcome of a recent AEC presentation. In at least one case, an attendee was deeply offended in the manner in which the lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender community was

portrayed. I was not present at this session. Having said that, some felt that the language used to describe the study population was offensive. The presenter, when confronted, was surprised by the criticism. This case represents a teachable moment.

As our nation struggles with policy and practice around gender and sexual orientation issues, NEHA sees itself as a convenor, a safe place, where legitimate health issues can be explored in an environment of mutual respect and inclusion. Bloodborne pathogens, needle exchange programs, and sexually transmitted diseases are, after all, legitimate public health issues. We should carefully attempt to strike the right tone and be sensitive to words that potentially convey hurt. I know this situation firsthand. About 15 years ago I (regretfully) introduced the president of a community college as the president of a “junior” college. Ouch, I’m still in recovery from that event. I was unaware of the sensitivity of the issue. I know now that words matter.

I am not asking you to embrace someone else’s beliefs. I am not asking you to compromise your values. I am not asking you to question your identity. I *am* asking you to recommit yourself to the notion that environmental health is a fact-based profession. We are professionals who search for evidence, clues, and trends to support informed decisions related to public health. Being fact finders is to be on a journey of discovery. We cannot do justice to our profession and the people we serve if we deliberately or inadvertently

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tently close our minds or conduct ourselves in a manner that excludes a segment of society. NEHA is for everybody—not just those who agree with us.

NEHA represents environmental health professionals regardless of their beliefs. Our members come from all walks of life and represent the entire political, religious, and racial spectrum. We intend to be an inclusive association that respects the full menu of perspectives on issues of national and global health, safety, and security. NEHA is committed to the proposition that while we may disagree with someone's viewpoint or orientation, we can and will treat them with respect and listen to their story.

I want each of you to know that I take inclusivity seriously. As we hire new employees we desire that they reflect the heterogeneous U.S. population. Our members live in red, blue, and purple states. I know that because I have had the privilege to visit many



The faces of NEHA. Photo courtesy of Michael Kitada, michael@michaelkitada.com.

of them. I have a special affection for frontier and rural environmental health programs because environmental health is public health for many of those communities. From Saipan to Puerto Rico and Utqiagvik to Key West, our association strives to provide a safe and healthy environment for all. We can't achieve that if we live separate professional lives because as the cliché goes, all of us are smarter than one of us.

Our association membership represents the second largest segment of the public health profession after nursing. We spend time in communities, businesses, and recreational areas. People across the country increasingly see us as leaders. There is tension in this time in our nation's history. Let's do our part to diffuse that tension. My heart tells me it is time to add compassion, empathy, and healing to our professional repertoire of essential services. Our country deserves no less. 🐼

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