I recently read an article published by the *Journal of Public Health* titled, “Environmental Health in Australia: Overlooked and Underrated.” The authors lament the fact that despite the importance of environmental health and the work of environmental health officers, they are practically invisible in Australia (Whiley, Willis, Smith, & Ross, 2018). This thought struck a chord with me as those of us in the U.S., as well as worldwide, have been singing the same lament for most, if not all, of my 40-plus-year career in environmental health.

The article cited three trends that have contributed to this lack of recognition and understanding of environmental health as a profession.

1. The shift in policy, particularly at the national level, away from ensuring adequate government-enforced safeguards for health to stressing personal responsibility for one’s health status.

2. A shift in the focus of public health toward the social determinants of health and away from the environmental and regulatory aspects of environmental public health. While there is no denying that factors such as poverty, nutrition, and personal lifestyle choices are hugely important in determining an individual’s health status, the shift ignores several important points:
   a. people living on the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum are the very ones most susceptible to illness or injury when environmental protective barriers do not exist;
   b. unless and until significant progress is made in finding solutions to the problems of poverty and homelessness, people living under these conditions seldom have the physical, fiscal, and emotional resources to help themselves; and
   c. one of the founding principles of the public health movement is the need to ensure the health status of the poor so that diseases do not spill over to the broader population.

3. The rise of neoliberalism and the consequent reduction in funding at the national, state, and provincial levels for public supported programs and activities. This trend results in local communities having to decide which, if any, environ-
mental public health programs they can continue to provide.

To these three trends I would add a fourth—the lack of a clear and easily understood definition of what environmental public health is. As the scope of environmental public health is so broad, spread across all media and among various government agencies at all levels of government, it is difficult to characterize the profession. People understand food inspector, hazmat responder, pest control, or just about any of the many program activities that environmental health professionals are responsible for. Very few, however, can put it all together to comprehend what environmental public health actually encompasses.

I would suggest that as a unifying characteristic, all environmental health professionals are risk assessors at the core of their practice. It does not matter what media, program, geographic area, or agency, environmental health professionals can enter a facility or area and be able to identify and characterize conditions that are likely to result in people becoming sick or injured. They can then propose an approach to prevent or resolve the risk. This ability is regardless of whether they call themselves sanitarians, environmental health specialists, industrial hygienists, or any other related title.

One final note, environmental health professionals tend to be too modest. Perhaps we feel intimidated by a physician’s in-depth knowledge of a disease or condition, or an engineer’s ability to design and oversee the construction of a drinking water plant. I would, however, posit that there is no other profession that has as broad a mandate and carries the responsibility of protecting the health status of our residents than the environmental health professional. Indeed, the physician contacts environmental health professionals when confronted by a child bitten by an animal for advice on what is the appropriate response. Environmental health professionals know (or can find out) what is the current level of rabies or other diseases in the community, what animals are potential vectors, and what is the appropriate prophylaxis. And the engineer is dependent on environmental health professionals for advice and approval for the design and installation of an onsite wastewater system.

We have nothing to be modest about. Environmental health professionals are the single most important practitioner when it comes to keeping the entire community healthy. What we need to do is step up to the plate and be involved and engaged at the policy level. ❆

Reference

Corresponding Author: Charles (Chuck) D. Treser, Principle Lecturer Emeritus, Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences, School of Public Health, University of Washington, 1959 NE Pacific Street, F-226D, Seattle, WA 98109-7234. E-mail: ctreser@uw.edu.

DAVIS CALVIN WAGNER SANITARIAN AWARD

The American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) announces the annual Davis Calvin Wagner Sanitarian Award. The award will be presented by AAS during the National Environmental Health Association’s (NEHA) 2019 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. The award consists of an individual plaque and a perpetual plaque that is displayed in NEHA’s office lobby.

Nominations for this award are open to all AAS diplomates who:

1. Exhibit resourcefulness and dedication in promoting the improvement of the public’s health through the application of environmental and public health practices.
2. Demonstrate professionalism, administrative and technical skills, and competence in applying such skills to raise the level of environmental health.
3. Continue to improve through involvement in continuing education type programs to keep abreast of new developments in environmental and public health.
4. Are of such excellence to merit AAS recognition.

NOMINATIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY APRIL 15, 2019.

Nomination packages should be e-mailed to Gary P. Noonan at gnoonan@charter.net.

Files should be in Word or PDF format.

For more information about the award nomination, eligibility, and the evaluation process, as well as previous recipients of the award, please visit sanitarians.org/awards.