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Environmental Health: The Invisible Profession



Editor’s Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, NEHA has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal’s* readership. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

Following 10 years with a local health department, Charles (Chuck) Treser was recruited to join the environmental health faculty at the University of Washington (UW) to lead a project developing a system for assuring the continuing competencies of environmental health professionals. Recently retired (sort of), he remains active in environmental health by teaching two courses each year at UW. He is the immediate past chairman of the American Academy of Sanitarians.

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 Aus-

tralia (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

Whiley, H., Willis, E., Smith, J., & Ross, K. (2018). Environmental health in Australia: Overlooked and underrated. *Journal of Public Health*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1093/pubmed/fdy156

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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.