

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

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

The Journey Into the Future Points Upstream

The story unfolds like many: a conference call with professional colleagues who wonder out loud, “Where is the environmental health profession?” In this case, it was a team from Duke University that explained that recent studies on colorectal cancer and stroke had ruled out the usual causal suspects—poverty-driven poor diet and lifestyle choices. It seemed there might be environmental factors at play. As other health professionals grappled with the significance of the study’s findings, reportedly no one from the environmental health profession was in the room to weigh in.

The Department of Community and Family Medicine in the Duke University School of Medicine has been contributing to an important initiative that works to improve the health of the nation through collaboration between primary care and public health. The Practical Playbook Team represents a classic academic incubator in that it has struggled to solve one of the most profound issues of our time: how to grease the rails between two stationary locomotives, public health and primary care. The outcome is the Practical Playbook, a web-based resource that provides expert insights, actionable advice, and tools to help individuals and groups work together to improve population health.

Many may feel this work is a noble, but challenging cause. With slashed budgets and overflowing portfolios, many readers may be left wondering how they can be expected to entertain yet another responsibility, particularly something as abstract as working with

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healthcare providers. My advice? Remember why you got into this business.

Many of us love the adrenaline rush associated with solving environmental health mysteries. What was the source of the *Cryptosporidium*? The kiddie pool or the tri-tip? How do you effectively disinfect personal protective equipment? Is there lead in the community garden soil? How do we efficiently drain *Aedes aegypti* breeding areas? But more important than the oxytocin-mediated rush, we do this job because we genuinely cherish the health, safety, and security of our families, neighborhoods, and communities. That’s why working with healthcare providers is essential.

We can’t solve today’s challenges with the same thinking and approaches we used yesterday. Working with healthcare providers, policy makers, and elected officials is critical to the future of our profession. Let me share a few examples.

- This morning I opened the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* Express app and the leading article discussed *Candida auris*. This pathogenic fungus is largely resistant to the

three most effective classes of antifungal medication. It also appears to be acquired by a visit to the hospital. Healthcare would benefit from our infection control expertise. Environmental health is profoundly local, and your local emergency room or hospital is increasingly becoming a hot bed of infection.

- I also read this week that sick employees cause approximately 45% of all food-borne infections in the U.S. In addition, the national turnover rate in retail food is 94%. That’s astounding! We are not going to train, inspect, or digitize our way out of this mess. We need to partner with elected officials in Washington, DC, to promote reasonable paid sick leave policies and a health insurance safety net for part-time and casual laborers. We would benefit from working together with the healthcare industry to address this issue with our elected officials. Together we are stronger.
- This week I was one of the keynote speakers at Environmental Health Australia’s (www.eh.org.au) national conference in Tasmania, where the Tasmania Minister of Health, the Honorable Michael Ferguson, MP, did a fabulous job articulating how he valued our profession. Tasmanian veterinarians, pediatricians, and political appointees came together to listen to presentations on immunizations and a transmissible cancer that plagues the Tasmanian devil. Our southern hemisphere counterparts appear intent on being weavers, threading together the health of their respective states, and less intent on being framed as content experts.

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NEHA NEWS

Join the UNCOVER EH Effort!

Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH) is a national initiative between NEHA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Baylor University to learn more about the environmental health profession.

The study, scheduled to begin this year, will consist of an online survey and in-person workshops of environmental health professionals working at health departments. Its purpose is to describe the environmental health workforce, understand the challenges environmental health professionals face to ensure healthy communities, and learn more about the resources and training needed to address current and emerging environmental health issues.

“We are pleased to lead a study that exclusively examines the single largest segment of the public health workforce—environmental health. While many other workforce studies have been conducted over the years, this comprehensive study is the first to be conducted by the environmental health profession for the environmental health profession,” said Dr. David Dyjack, NEHA executive director.

Efforts of environmental health professionals are critical for protecting public health and the environment, yet these efforts often

go unnoticed until problems occur (e.g., foodborne outbreaks, vectorborne diseases, contaminated water supplies, disasters).

A national-level report will provide a foundation for leaders and decision makers to formulate evidence-based decisions regarding workforce capacity and public health safety for their communities. Additionally, this information can serve as a tool to plan future environmental health training needs and to better understand emerging environmental health issues.

Here are five ways in which you can help.

1. Register to receive the e-mail survey that will be launched later this year.
2. Sign up for UNCOVER EH e-mail updates.
3. Give an UNCOVER EH presentation at your staff meeting. Find slides available on our Web site at www.neha.org/uncover-eh.
4. Invite us to present information on UNCOVER EH at your affiliate meeting or training.
5. Spread the word to your colleagues and local communities through newsletters, e-mails, Web site links, etc.

Visit www.neha.org/uncover-eh to learn more about UNCOVER EH and help spread the word to ensure that we capture information from as many environmental health professionals as possible. 🐛

Did You Know?

A new training from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and partners emphasizes the use of integrated pest management to address public health pests and vectors that spread diseases, including Zika virus and others. Get started today at <http://lms.southcentralpartnership.org/vcehp.php>!

DirectTalk

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In the process, they seem to have effectively stitch the health professions together to create a web of health.

We're not Australia. I'm simply saying that over time we should scan the landscape to identify opportunities to build systems approaches with clinicians in our local, federally-qualified health centers, public hospitals, and health departments. The Practical Playbook (www.practicalplaybook.org) highlights approaches for doing just that. Encourage your staff to familiarize themselves with its Web site content and share it with their colleagues. Hey, if you are inspired, why not attend a local healthcare executive dinner meeting and listen to their challenges? Get yourself a grand rounds lecture invitation or speak at a local nursing meeting. You'll be delighted by the reception you receive.



Dawn on Hobart's Derwent River. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

I contend that we need to row upstream. Let's commit to identifying the root causes of environmental health challenges and not limit ourselves to simply measuring and monitoring because they are easier paths. At

the same time, let's discover the next-generation adrenaline rush by delivering value to society through meaningful engagement with the clinical health professions.

The hub of social life in Hobart, Tasmania, is the Derwent River. Its headwaters are found in the center of Tasmania. Regretfully, I won't make it there. You know the drill—there are competing demands, meetings, and phone calls back home. One of those meetings will be to strategize with the Practical Playbook Team on how to strengthen our profession and advance the health of the nation through an environmental health—primary care partnership. This conversation is long overdue.

Best from Down Under. 🐛

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