

2-3-12 One Man's Meat

It is said that one man's meat is another man's poison. This saying comes to mind at this time of year for health agents but, perhaps now more than ever, in a time of recession. It is brush burning season and some people expand on their repertoire of combustible items. In order to save money they burn their rubbish, their garbage, and even large items that might require a fee if brought to their transfer station. Just because they aren't supposed to burn these things doesn't mean I don't understand why they are. And if all they've added to the fire, is some paper and some wood from a broken piece of furniture, then maybe it's not all that different from brush burning. However, at a time when people are losing jobs and making decisions as to whether they will go without food or without heat, the temptation to burn rubbish is indeed understandable. Rubbish disposal is expensive and some individuals cannot afford it. I beg these individuals to at least recycle. I tell them to think of it as free rubbish pick-up, or disposal, depending on what town you live in.

During the season of brush burning, both the Fire Departments and Boards of Health receive extra calls on this issue. The Fire Department issues the permit for burning and, as the issuer, they can also rescind that permit. The Board of Health becomes involved when the caller is concerned about air pollution affecting his or her health. That concern is a real one and must be addressed. At least at this time of year the burning is outdoors and it's easier to find evidence, or lack of evidence, regarding what should and shouldn't be set on fire under the guise of brush burning.

When the burning is taking place inside the house in a fireplace or wood burning stove, it is far more challenging to discover whether or not improper disposal is taking place. I can look at the color and odor of the smoke in an attempt to determine if it is what you would expect from burning seasoned wood. If it appears to be wood smoke, then I am inclined to let it be, as it is a legal activity. However, if my observations of the color and odor lend credence to the claim of burning rubbish, then I knock on the door and I say hello. I introduce myself and tell the people why I am there. When I first became a health agent, I dreaded these calls, assuming people would be very angry with me. In time, this became easier because I realized that I wasn't there to make a claim; I was there to let them know somebody had a concern.

If there is no evidence of wrongdoing, I thank them for their time and their willingness to speak to me. It truly is a privilege and a pleasure to have a civil conversation with people. Respect for others and tolerance of others is at the heart of that civility. When there is evidence of wrongdoing, my fingers are crossed that this conversation will also be respectful. It is here that the health agent is supported by science. There are reasons for air pollution laws but the existence of laws doesn't immediately or universally result in compliance or even understanding of the reason for those laws. We all benefit from a better understanding of the reasons for the law.

There are other times when one neighbor's right to clean air is equal to his neighbor's right to burn wood. When the agent finds herself in between that rock and hard place, it is best for neighbors to see what they can work out on their own. For instance, I sympathized when a woman called the Board of Health office, worried about her son's asthma becoming worse when

her neighbor was burning brush. But when I saw that her neighbor had a permit and was burning only twigs and branches, I asked if she had ever approached her neighbor to see if they could work out some method of communicating their different needs. For instance, if she explained to her neighbor about her son's health condition worsening when there was smoke in the air perhaps, just perhaps, her neighbor would care about that. And perhaps, just perhaps, he could say, "I hope to burn next Saturday because that's the only time I have." And perhaps, just perhaps, she could say, "Thank you for the notice. I'll be sure to keep my doors and windows closed and maybe I'll go elsewhere for a while." (Hey, I health agent can dream, can't she?)

Just because an activity is legal, doesn't mean that it's healthy. Still, it's legal. And just because our health is harmed by the actions of another doesn't mean that we can make that person stop doing what we want them to stop doing. Sometimes we just have to take care of ourselves. Taking care ourselves is a lot easier than being angry and frustrated on a daily basis. That is another kind of poison in and of itself.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. Do you have a meat/poison story? You can tell her at 781 293 6768 or cdrininan@town.halifax.ma.us