

4-20-12 Is Posh Necessarily Proper?

Speaking up, especially in public, does not come easily to me, so being a health agent has been useful experience for my life's journey, that experience and process with the continuous learning curve. Praising people for their good deeds is easier for me than criticizing and years of raising children taught me that it is more useful, also. Ever since H1N1 I have found it easy and fun to praise and thank people for their cough etiquette, employing a motion of face into the elbow area rather than blasting the germy droplets out into the space in front and around them. People smile and seem to be pleased when I say, "Excellent cough etiquette! Thank you!"

Even though I am convinced of the power of praise, there are times when criticism has to be dealt. When out in public, I have the right to protect myself. Avoidance of certain areas, people and actions may provide enough protection. But, when sitting down at a restaurant and paying hard earned money for the meal, I want my experience to be a safe one. When dining with my sister, a chef, we are the dynamic duo of standards and expectations. She, while understanding the need for health codes, demands quality ingredients and taste. I, hoping for a culinary delight, demand the practice of health codes. I can't very well enjoy the gastronomic experience if it also creates one inside my gastrointestinal tract!

So, there we were, the duo, sitting at a posh place celebrating my birthday. I looked to the side and saw a waiter/bartender, while talking to several young female wait-staff, reach with his left hand for a paper napkin. With his right hand, he blew his nose and then tossed the napkin in the trash, as he continued talking. A moment later, he apparently felt the need to rid the upper lip of moisture and proceeded to wipe his nose and upper lip with his right hand and sleeve. His hands then rested on his hips and shirt as he continued conversing.

No proper cough/sneeze etiquette. No washing of the hands. No avoidance of touching with his contaminated hands.

I woke up from my stunned state and motioned for my waitress as she walked by. After telling her the story and watching her walk over to speak to the nose-blowing-waiter, my sister says, "Aren't you glad you're drinking a glass of wine and not a seltzer with a lemon in it?" Yes, I was!

The man listened to his criticism and for some reason left the entire area without washing his hands. Was he sent to the men's room? Was he sent to the "principal's office"? Was he fired? He did not show any particular emotion. I would have preferred that he wash his hands right there, where diners could see. Changing his apron and shirt would have been a good idea, also.

Later that day, we couldn't help but laugh when we saw displayed as "ART", a large work of punctured paper replicating the photo to its left of a man sneezing. The photograph had captured the droplets flying out in front of the man's face for a good couple feet, where the weight of them finally began to respond to gravity and they proceeded to sink downward. We considered recommending another location for hanging this image, where it could remind food servers but didn't think there was any chance of it being taken seriously.

If I owned or managed a restaurant, I would want to know about concerns and complaints of the public, so I decided to call the next day and peak to the manager. After describing the incident and the time and the witnessed outcome, I suggested that a refresher training was in order, as no one in the circle of wait staff reacted to it.

In public health, we have phrases for food safety. One of them is "from farm to the table". The intention is to remind us that the public needs to be protected from foodborne illness with safe handling, washing, transporting, cold temperature holding, storage, preparation, hot temperature holding and finally, safe delivery to the table with clean hands. It is a shame to go through all that effort for food safety and have the plate or napkin or utensils be the culprit spreading germs to the diner.

The luxury dining experience costs more. The ambience is classy. Is posh necessarily safer, though? Not necessarily. In fact, you may pay in unintended ways if they don't sufficiently train in food safety and if you don't speak up for yourself. Posh? Pish posh! Sneeze, blow or cough? Give the hands a wash!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can tell her your dining stories at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us