

4-27-12 Risky Business!

Oh, the things they don't tell you at the job interview! If the interviewers suggested that being a health agent can be quite dangerous, some people might change their mind. I suppose another possibility is that the bold in nature would be attracted to the challenge and the hiring board ends up with a thrill-seeking, power-hungry agent who will not serve their town in the best ways. Well, I am not in the second category and I did not run out of the interview but I certainly was not told about the dangers. And I'm glad they didn't because here I am, with this very interesting job but I'm still learning the skill of not placing myself in harm's way. My sister, Marilyn was famous for saying, "Danger, danger!" She saw them everywhere and was constantly trying to prevent harm coming to her grandchildren. Even she did not realize the dangers faced by health agents!

The first time that risk of injury and/or death was pointed out to me was during the soil evaluation course. In the classroom we learned about glaciers and the various ways in which they deposited soils, but out in the field we were preparing for evaluating soils at perc tests. While the test holes were only four or five feet deep, (as opposed to the ten plus feet deep holes we evaluate at actual perc tests) we were cautioned about the dangers of trenches, where soils can collapse, immediately suffocating a person before they can be rescued. We were also given some pretty scary numbers to make the point and make it memorable. A cubic foot of soil is approximately 120 pounds per cubic foot. All that weight for one little box of soil, the size of a few shoe boxes! A cave-in onto a person working in the hole or a person standing on the side being dragged down with the collapse will easily bring thousands of pounds down upon the person.

At every single perc test, the engineer, the excavator and I are all aware of the seriousness of the situation. Despite that awareness, we still look out for one another. We learn to stand at the end of these rectangular holes, for the sides are more likely to collapse. While walking around the deep hole someone might think he has left plenty of distance for safety, but another person might have a better view of the inside and call out, "Watch out there! The grass is now on an overhanging ledge with nothing below. Move further away!" We have to be especially cautious when others are there to watch. The homeowner or realtor probably does not realize how dangerous the situation is. And then there are the children! Little boys, especially, will beg the parents to get close to the hole "just for a look". "Please! Please?" At that point we have to be commanding officers and issue orders to get away from the hole and watch from a window.

Cave-ins are not the only hazards of excavating. There can be oxygen depletion, water infiltration and/or the excavator might hit wires or utilities. Of course, the area was supposed to be marked for all utilities by Dig Safe but sometimes all locations of wires and pipes are not

known. This serves as another reason and reminder on the importance of building permits and accurate record keeping. They can save a life! A decade later, after seeing the actual statistics of injuries and fatalities in connection with excavations, OSHA began to require trench permits for any hole deeper than it is wide.

Last week's perc test brought me in close proximity to a completely different kind of danger. We looked up at the antique house and saw evidence of a huge bee colony living and busily caring for their precious honey combs. I loved watching them and their flight pattern back and forth between flowering plants and hive but the bees soon became agitated with the presence of the excavator too close to their home and smack dab in the middle of their line of flight. The engineer received a sting on his forehead and had to refresh his memory on the directions for injecting himself with his Epi pen. I am not afraid of insects but my knees began to shake as I realized that I, too, have been prescribed the epinephrine for allergic reactions to bee and hornet stings. We quickly agreed to abandon that hole and leave the bees to themselves. We would find suitable soil a bit further away, for the sake of safety.

Staying alive is a good thing! Tune in next week, as I continue the list of dangerous scenarios encountered in the line of duty as a health agent.

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