

Blurry Line between Public and Private Health

Diogenes Syndrome: It's Not Just A Load of Rubbish

Sometimes the line between public and private health is not clear-cut. Sometimes those areas overlap and both need attention. When those “concerned citizens” call me, they usually claim that a person is creating a public health threat. The caller might be concerned because their neighbor’s swimming pool is not being used and it is full of green, stagnant water. That caller is worried about mosquitoes breeding in the pool. Another might call to complain that someone’s yard is full of unsightly stuff. Hmmmm...How does that hurt the neighbors? I’ll have to ask some questions. Someone else might call to complain that there are cats all around their neighbor’s house and that the yard now reeks with an acrid stench, both in the yard and coming from the house.

When I receive these calls, I ask some questions and then take a ride to see if I can confirm the alleged conditions. In the end, I have to decide if either party or just one or both have a valid health related concern.

Recently, it was a call about cats and odors. At one point in the conversation, I said, “I suppose every town has one.” The caller couldn’t believe it. “They do?” she asked incredulously. There was a tone of desperation in her voice that led me to believe there was some accuracy to the call when she told me the small house had at least thirty to fifty cats in it.

Yes, most every town has one, or maybe they have several. The house that is slowly falling apart, with weeds growing in the gutter and perhaps cats are everywhere, too. They are on the porch, in the windows and occasionally they get hit while crossing the road. You rarely see the people, though. The blinds stay closed. You may or may not see a car. You drive by and you wonder about them. Unless you live right next door, you probably don’t keep those people in your thoughts for very long.

Eventually, you hear of a foreclosure or a condemnation or a death or the removal of the inhabitants and you are shocked by the details. The person lived in squalor and domestic filth beyond belief. The filth is not beyond description but I won’t describe it here. The filth and personal neglect, combined with the likelihood of animal involvement, either domestic and/or vermin, result in very challenging forensic work when these people die in their home and are not discovered right away, as is usually the case with recluses living in filth.

Most of the literature refers to elderly people, usually living alone, although couples, known as “squalor a deux”, are also documented. Medical and psychiatric literature of the elderly makes one thing clear: physiological changes bringing about such conditions as dementia or Alzheimer’s, initiated the gradual decline resulting in the self neglect. Old age does not by itself bring about personality changes or a rapid decline in self-interest and self care. There is a difference between changing eyesight that doesn’t see the little stain on the shirt and 20/20 eyesight that doesn’t “see” a problem with filth.

I have made my ride and confirmed the claims and concerns of neighbors. I have discovered that “squalor a quatre” also exists. I have discovered this condition of being unconcerned with personal and environmental hygiene has a name. It is called “Diogenes Syndrome”. Diogenes was a Greek philosopher from the fourth century BC who was known for his disregard for domestic comforts to the point of making a virtue of extreme

poverty. He taught contempt for human achievements and a return to animalism. Many anecdotes refer to his praise of and his own doglike behavior. The modern term cynic derives from the Greek word, kynikos, the adjective form of kyon, meaning dog.

While Diogenes made a striking impression on artists, philosophers, writers and musicians over the millennium, (Check out William Blake, Rodgers and Hart, Rubens, Anton Chekhov and even Led Zeppelin's references to Diogenes, among many others.), the term, as it applies to human behavior in everyday society refers to lack of concern with hygiene.

I don't know enough about this to know how it will play out. I know that, thankfully, I don't stand alone. Thank goodness for such organizations as MSPCA. That's right. Thank goodness for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Laws to prevent cruelty to animals existed before laws to protect children. They are old and still very powerful. The family in question has agreed to cooperate, give almost all the cats away and neuter and vaccinate the few they keep.

I will need to establish trust with the family, work with them on cleaning out the house and, well, we'll see. Can we make basic but necessary changes? They indicate a desire to have work done by contractors. They may need some professional cleaning help before that can happen.

Do they need healthcare? Do they need mental health care? Do they want it?

Time will tell what sort of team is involved in this case. In the meantime, I am considering cat-tagging regulations. The purpose is similar to the tagging of dogs. Even if a cat does not wear a tag, if it is issued, it is because the cat is neutered and vaccinated. Should we limit the number of cats? What is reasonable? Six? Four? A total number of cats and dogs? Let me know what you think and I will advertise the hearings for the proposed regulation when I have more information. Hoping to hear from you, as a "concerned citizen".

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