

08-24-18 Fun Phone Calls

How much fun can a health agent have on the phone talking about septic systems? Apparently, quite a bit, as a call last week proved.

It is true that many calls are dry in their factual nature or deal with scheduling and there certainly are the more serious ones; those of complaints or people at their breaking point, usually with housing problems fearing eviction. And there are calls of an emergency nature requiring quick action and team work.

But sometimes a call is just fun, even when talking about septic systems. Last week's call began in a routine manner. A few days earlier, she had called asking about the installer. I gave her the name and contact information. The second call revealed there was a problem of some sort.

It can be challenging, especially on the phone, discussing the components of a septic system. What if the person does not know what I mean by outlet tee or D box or filter or the term as-built? What if the caller has the as-built but is still uncertain as to where to begin her investigation?

All this applied to last week's call. However, I admired her determination and willingness to communicate over the phone, as we described where we were "standing" and "looking" at the house and the street. In other words, were we oriented the same way? (This would make a great exercise in a communication class.)

She was telling me that "fluid was going into it". I had to ask what she meant by "it". Had she opened the cover to the septic tank and she could see where effluent was entering? No, that was not the case. Back to square one, as she told me she did not even know where the "holding tank" was.

That was the clue that she was looking at the surface of her yard. I asked, "Are you seeing a wet area in the grass? And is it smelly?"

"Yes! That is what I see! I need to know what is happening. This was put in just a year ago!"

Now we were getting somewhere and that is when the fun began. She, on her end of the phone and I, on my end, communicated so that we were oriented the same way. As I described the location of the septic tank, she could see it also. We then talked about the chart of "cross ties", or "swing ties", as seen on the as-built.

She saw it and she was determined! Good for her! She was a learner!

As we arrived at this point of understanding, at least as to where we stood in relation to the tank, it sounded like the filter, on the outlet end might be clogged. We discussed that and the reasons for it. She had already learned the year before that a variety of wipes claiming to be septic safe are not. She wanted to know more, such as what to expect when the outlet cover, over the outlet tee was opened. Well, now, we would have to get graphic and many people want nothing to do with that!

I told her that the septic tank serves the purpose of separating the effluent. The top layer is lightweight and floats. It is called the scum layer. The pvc tee pipe points down to the middle of the tank where the somewhat clear effluent sits. That is what is intended to flow out to the leaching area and be treated there, to be safe for the ground water. At the bottom of the tank sits the sludge; the heavy solids needing to be removed when the septic tank is pumped, which is really “cleaning” the tank, as the tank will always be full; fluid in, fluid out.

She actually wanted to know more! The fun was beginning. I told her the Title V inspectors have a “sludge judge”, I kid you not. A measurement rod that measures the scum, the effluent and the sludge. She understood and laughed at the appropriateness of the tool’s name.

At this point, the homeowner was so open to learning and doing, I shared my first experience with these septic tank layers. Long before I was a health agent and had no idea what an onsite septic system entailed, I heard that a tank needed pumping and ordered it to be done. I was there (always wise) to watch. When the very small, not so heavy cover was lifted, I saw a large rock. Some might call it a small boulder. I also saw a stump. These were sitting on what I later learned was the scum layer. This is usually soft; but in this case it held a boulder and stump. I was frightened to think how accessible this was by lifting the small cover. I knew exactly which of my six children would have found it entertaining to show off to his friends the fun of dropping stuff into the septic tank.

The woman laughed, and I did, too! I had to pay extra for the “debris” in the tank and I immediately ordered a large, very heavy concrete cover for the tank.

I explained to my caller that being a mother provided the most important education for being a health agent. I learned: *Keep your eyes open. Be patient. Be curious. Have empathy. Enjoy teaching. Let your yes mean yes and your no mean*

no. Know when to draw the line. Be a police woman when you must but motivate others to make that unnecessary.

The woman laughed because, being a mother, she knew exactly what I meant. It was fun to be understood.

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