

9-28-18 A Nuisance by Any Other Name

I've been thinking of writing a list of rhyming phrases for public health. I was thinking of health agent work, though, rather than health, in general. I mean, if I was talking about all health topics, sure, I could come up with something about diet and riot or blood and crud but, as I said, I had health agent work in mind. And that work is with people and in the field. It is reality-based and experiential, as opposed to purely theoretical or statistical.

So, here's my first rhyme, just in time, for this week's column, to you from me:
When nothing seems to make sense, turn your attention to nuisance.

Rhyming ditties, I admit, have a way of sounding trite but they do assist the memory and that is important. Memory hooks pull you back to the point at any age. Now, what is the point of the nuisance law for health agents?

First, it lies within Part I of Massachusetts General Law. That section is dedicated to the Administration of the Government. Within that part I, is Title XVI, and there we find Chapter 111, referring to Public Health. Now that we have homed in on the correct chapter, there we find many sections talking about various topics with which boards of health are entrusted with the duty of enforcing.

An often-quoted section is 143: Noisome Trades. This section includes noisome and injurious odors, which concludes with, "this section shall apply to the operations of piggeries."

Massachusetts' first board of health (Boston, 1799) was concerned about numerous activities taking place at the time, such as those piggeries. (I guess because they smell!) They also wanted to know if fish were being properly gutted and cleaned before being brought inland. Feathers (birds) could not be "landed" without an inspection determining they carried no infection. Were they concerned about mites? Did they know that birds can carry viruses spread to humans? (Think Avian flu.) I don't know. They did not say. Oysters could not be possessed or sold from the first day of June to the first day of September. Maybe they knew about red tide. I don't know. They did not say but these laws highlight the awareness of known problems even if the name of those problems were not known. Thus, they acted.

What I do know is they were wise enough to understand and foresee that while the general law was necessary as far as its intention was concerned, the particulars might change with time. Yester-yore's squealing pigs are today's dirt bikes. A recent inquiry from a person greatly bothered by his neighbor's dirt bike activities was interesting. As he began his summary, I responded with, "Yes, we have dealt with this issue." He continued to indicate that I probably did not realize how distressing the noise could be and so, he wanted to show me something he found online. It was an enforcement letter from a health agent to a resident regarding the dust, odors and noise created by dirt bikes. It was an "Abate a Nuisance" letter. I took the printout from the man and began to read. It seemed so familiar. The names and addresses had been removed. I finally said, "Hey, this is my letter! This is the case I was referring to!" It was a small-world-moment.

Another call to the office in the nuisance category was that of a cow carcass on a roof. Yes, that is correct. Well, it was reported as a carcass but it wasn't a whole carcass. It was just the skull of a slaughtered cow, with skin still intact. The police department was called regarding this concern of... of what? Perhaps the caller thought it wasn't

“normal” (That is problematic; so many definitions of “normal”!), legal or safe. I don’t know but when I was informed of the situation by the police department, I said, “Oh, that’s a nuisance situation. The cow skull can attract insects and wild animals. I’ll talk to the owner.”

Upon seeing the skull, with horns and skin intact, on the lower portion of the small barn, facing the sun, I mentally placed my bet that the property owner was waiting for nature to take its cleansing course so that he could have something worthy of a Georgia O’Keefe painting.

I quickly filled out my “I received a call about the following” form. I confirmed the cow skull, asked for a call so that we could discuss the owner’s intention, and, in the meantime, I asked that the owner please move the skull out of view from the road. I stuck the folded paper in the front door with my card and left, as knocks and calls did not produce any response. The following day, the message on the office answering machine indicated a not-too-happy customer but one who would be willing to comply with my request. (And I was right! He was not finished with “the process”. He was just trying to preserve the skull!)

As you can see from the skull, public health is never dull.

What’s the next nuisance? Hopefully it’s not dealt with imprudence.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. What do you think is a nuisance? And is it just annoying or is there any actual health hazard? Let me know at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us