

12-31-16 Looking Back and Looking Ahead

2016 was a roller coaster of a ride. There were tragedies worldwide, both natural disasters and way too many human-delivered horrors. Being surrounded by bad news and fake news, while struggling with our own personal challenges can leave society filled with a generalized anxiety; a constant sense of worry about the present and for the future. That is not healthy. It is preferable to consider these circumstances as a call to action.

At various times over the years, public health groups have crafted slogans and logos trying to inform the public and to instill in them some confidence someone would take care of them. Some years ago, it was “*Promote, Protect and Prevent*”. Having a background in health promotion, I liked it. I thought, “Yes, that is what we are supposed to do, promote health, protect the public and prevent public health problems to whatever extent we can.

The prevention is probably the most challenging, as it requires knowledge of existing problems, why they exist and what methods/approaches will succeed in preventing them. That applies to the variety of layers of public health. Why are we seeing an increase in tick-borne disease? What can we do to prevent that? Why are we seeing an increase in addiction and mental health issues and what can we do to prevent it? Will we ever be able to prevent future cyanobacteria blooms? (Yes we will!)

Just as Climate Warming has evolved into Climate Change, public health slogans have evolved also. The current buzz slogan is “*Know, Plan, Prepare*”. I have a reusable bag with the words and I recently saw a billboard with this same message. While I acknowledge the necessity of knowledge to inform our plans for the future, I find the current slogan somewhat ominous compared to the previous one. While it could be applied to epidemiological issues such as Zika, it also applies to situations that were not on our minds until recent times, such as how to respond to an active shooter situation. We recently discussed this in Halifax and are making plans to be better prepared.

While these “big picture” plans are worthwhile, it is the current, just arrived, hot potatoes tossed our way that consume our time and resources at the local level. That happens each and every year. We know “it” is coming but we don’t know what or when. We can somewhat prepare through education and staying abreast of the latest trends. When that phone rings and the message is received, it is time to act, prepared or not.

So it was we arrived to witness a huge rat infestation. Education on the topic paid off for that one. It was still a surprise to witness another huge rat infestation at a completely different location. Experience paid off with that one!

It was time to act when we arrived at that rental and discovered the tenant was not exaggerating. The house was rotting and the attic full of squirrels. At another rental, the toilet was not working. At yet another rental, the owner was invading the tenant’s privacy. In one case, the owner actually told the tenant she did not need a door to her apartment, as the opening led to the “common area”! He was brought to court and the tenant won. At another rental property, the heat was broken and the elusive owner was not responsive; so, off I went to housing court to file a complaint. I shall see him in court, where he can tell it to the judge.

Education paid off when it came to a case of bed bugs. However, learning and experiencing are two different things. I was so relieved that I did not have to experience the bed bugs to know the licensed pest

control company handled the situation well by heating the premises and midway, turning over cushions and mattresses. I was pleased it was handled with the thermal approach rather than the pesticide approach.

I am so fortunate to have a knowledgeable and helpful board. Some health agents cannot properly act as inspectors when their board orders him or her to let things be. Currently, I am thankful for their knowledge as several large septic systems are being installed and discoveries are made, such as gas pipes that did not appear on the engineer's proposed plans.

And so it is that every year is a busy year, with more of the same and/or more of things new.

I predict that each year for many years, we will discover more cases of hoarding and living in filth, as the baby boomers age. These people not only live in unsafe conditions for themselves but they endanger the lives of rescuers. The sooner they can be discovered and assisted, the more lives will be saved. If you know of a case, contact your local board of health.

We will continue to hear more about the prevalence of drug addictions. It is currently pervading all aspects of society, not sparing any segment or geographical area. Learning how to help the addict in ways that don't enable them, yet offer hope and loving support for who those people are, rather than what they do, is critical but difficult. Talk, read, meet and remember the "Three C's": You did not cause it. You cannot control it. You cannot cure it. That is as difficult for a health agent to learn and apply as it is for a parent, sister, brother, grandparent or friend. The health agent has the advantage of being able to work with others on a team approach to prevention. I am grateful to the numerous Police Departments of the region for being aware of this growing threat to our loved ones and to the very fabric of our society. If you have any information on illegal manufacturing or distribution of drugs, in particular, opiates such as Percocet or heroin, please call your local Board of Health and your local Police Department. Next year will be as varied as any other but I earnestly hope to see a decrease in this category.

Every category of public health is a call to action.

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