

2-12-10 Public Health Trends and Patterns

A recently finished annual report for the Board of Health allows me to see trends, albeit on a small scale. I can't help but think back over previous years and it's easy enough to check the numbers. What's increasing? What's decreasing? Chronic Hepatitis C and Lyme disease, along with some lesser known tick-borne diseases, have been on the rise for the last decade. I suspect that a large portion of society is in denial when it comes to these and other chronic diseases. Hepatitis C is usually spread through blood contact, such as might occur with the use of reused syringes. This disease is on the rise due to behavioral trends in society and it is not pleasant or easy to think about that. However, it is easy to marginalize people with behavior-associated illness by thinking of "them" as different from "us". While we can't legislate how humans behave, legislature taking those behaviors into account can make a difference. Allowing syringes to be purchased and needle-exchange programs have reduced disease. We would be seeing even more illness without those programs.

We all know how Lyme disease is spread, don't we? But do we really want to think about it every time we garden or go for a walk? Yet, as our population grows, combined with the ever growing population of deer, happily living in suburbia, we are more frequently at risk of coming in contact with the female tick needing her blood meal. It is survival of the fittest and viruses, bacteria and blue-green algae seem to be the fittest of all.

Other trends are not so one directionally inclined. Some come and go. Housing problems seem to form one of those patterns. In good economic times, I might be more likely to receive a call from tenants asking if the owner can evict them and to let me know that the property owner has not kept the place up to code. In those circumstances, the tenant has learned that the report to the Board of Health will offer up to six months of protection from eviction, while work is done at the rental. While the involvement of the Board of Health may stall eviction, usually that is all that is accomplished, in addition to the renovations. They almost always result in eviction of the complainer. However, when the economy suffers, the tenants are more likely to keep quiet, especially if the rent is more affordable than other places.

While a down turning economy might initially result in fewer housing inspections, when they do arise, they seem to be worse and more complicated. Financial concerns are at the top of the worry list for most of us. I am reminded of one of my psychology classes, where we were talking about bio-feedback and the teacher demonstrated by asking for a volunteer to have the heart rate measured with auditory magnification by a little device clipped onto the finger. A young woman agreed to be the guinea pig. The professor chatted with her, encouraging her to take some deep breaths. We could hear her relax as the beep sound of her heart rate slowed. The teacher then began to bring up new topics by slipping in unexpected words: School work: beep

beep. Boyfriend: beep, beep, beep. Money: beep, beep, beep, beep! It was a very memorable demonstration.

Stress plays out in so many ways. If people feel hopeless, they may not bother to attempt what they think cannot be achieved. Of course, this only multiplies the problems to be dealt with. And, so it is, that tough times lead to troubled times. The recent manifestations of this trend can be seen in difficult housing inspections (picture clutter and dirt and rubbish pile-up and lack of maintenance) and also in water shut offs due to nonpayment of the water bill.

So far, the water shut offs have motivated people to pay the bill and get their water back on, or the termination has been avoided by talking to the Water Department about a payment plan.

This is new topic for my decade as a health agent. Is it legal to shut off the water? What would the courts say? What should homeowners do? What should a tenant do if faced with a shut off notice because the owner has not paid the bill? What should a health agent do when a house does not have a water supply? Tune in next week.

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