

If winter is here can spring be far behind? I am glad that sages of old thought to give us hope during these bleak and frigid times. It may seem difficult to believe that in less than a month it will officially be spring in New England. Have you noticed the signs? The tree buds have begun to swell. The slender branches of the birch are showing off their red signs of hope. The weeping willow resembles a golden fountain. These colorful, quiet happenings are especially beautiful against a winter sky. I recently delighted in the sound of a cardinal staking out his territory and I can't wait to hear the spring peepers, my most favorite sound of all sounds.

I am not so eager to hear what the mosquitoes are up to this year. Will it be good news? Will the weather patterns be in favor of a decrease in Eastern Equine Encephalitis? Will West Nile virus increase? I do not know but I am glad to say that thanks to the efforts of Kimberly King, who lost her daughter, Adreanna, to EEE in 2005, many State departments and agencies are now talking about diseases carried by insects, trying to be more informative and actively discussing preventive measures.

On March 1, I will attend an Arboviral Disease Conference, the first of its kind and scope for New England. Arbovirus is derived from three words. Ar comes from arthropod, meaning insects. Bo is from borne, as in carried by and virus is what is being carried. I don't know why the word does not include any indication of bacteria. I'll have to find out. I will have the opportunity for asking this question and others at the conference on March 1 in Shrewsbury.

Representatives from CDC, DPH, including epidemiologists and GIS coordinators, Mosquito Control Programs, entomologist and health agents and others will be there. Our new State Vet, Catherine Brown, will be there also. It is important to have vets at this kind of conference because with EEE, horse cases are the last red flag before human cases. Besides acting as a warning to people, horses suffer their own susceptibility to EEE and WNV. I remember that last year, several horses died of meningitis of unknown cause. Typically, a horse has been buried by the time the owner or vet might wish to have more tissues or blood for sampling. To help us better understand these casualties, there will be representatives from the Division of Molecular Diagnostics and Virology, Bureau of Laboratory Services of DPH.

Any time we talk about mosquitoes, we are talking complexities. It is not just a matter of larva hatch, mosquitoes bite birds with EEE and then some bite humans, so wear long sleeves and use repellent. There are so many more factors involved resulting in an increase (or decrease) in disease. Epidemiologists need to consider weather patterns, geographical differences, numerous species of mosquitoes and varying densities of animals such as birds and horses and human behavior.

Human behaviors also include their beliefs. There is the real challenge for preventing more cases of EEE and WNV. I can keep the public informed regarding these diseases but what do I do if their beliefs interfere with appropriate defensive actions? What if they believe that EEE is so rare that they most like will not be affected? What if they don't believe me that WNV is preventable because it is spread by mosquitoes breeding in containers? After all, people have control over containers. What if, even if

only on a barely conscious level, they are not afraid of mosquitoes because they are tiny, kind of cute, whirring insects, not big and scary like a bear or a crocodile? Communicating the risk effectively and accurately for EEE, in particular, is very challenging. It is not constant and on the increase, necessarily. It is cyclical, seasonal and dependent on weather changes. To address this challenge, there will also be Risk Communication specialists at this conference.

I recently saw a great example of the challenges we face in communicating our risk while watching a television show. The show, *At Close Range with National Geographic*, highlighted the work of photographer, Joel Sartore. His travels all over the world have brought him in close contact with all kinds of potentially dangerous animals such as wolves, bears and crocodiles but it was an insect bite in another country that gave him his brush with death. Reflecting on this he said, “North America is a great place to work. There are no diseases spread by insects. (pause....) Well, there’s West Nile virus(...pause...) and I suppose there’s Lyme disease but that’s it. Yeah, North America is a great place to work.” He never even mentioned EEE or its cousins, Western and St. Louis Encephalitis. This is proof to me that we have more work to do in getting the word out. EEE is almost always a double “D” disease. It is deadly or dire. It is not worth misleading ourselves on this. Take all the precautions, including insect repellent, while enjoying nature. For appreciating and participating in outdoor activities will and must continue. Let’s be as safe as possible as we enter a new spring.

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