

2-25-10 Water, Hygiene and Health

What we now know as the “American Journal of Public Health”, was, in 1904, known as the “American Journal of Public Hygiene”. Paul Revere, our Nation’s first Health Officer and president of Boston’s first Board of Health must have been shaking his head at the crawling pace of progress with public health issues. In 1799 he saw the importance of taking steps to prevent an outbreak of cholera, a deadly but highly preventable bacteriological disease of the intestine. Before the invention of the microscope, some people, such as Revere, were wise and healthy enough to make observations. They noticed the connections between poor housing, poor hygiene and poor health.

The word “poor” is the theme and it reflects living conditions, economic status and sometimes quality of judgment. They are intimately connected. And, I suspect, that they always will be.

After centuries of cholera outbreaks, killing millions, public health officials are still trying to prevent it through Education, Engineering and Economics. They are the Beneficent Triple E. The World Health Organization is still trying to get the word out on the importance of a united effort with these disciplines by saying that four interventions are essential in preventing cholera (and other communicable diseases):

- Provision of adequate safe drinking-water
- Proper personal hygiene
- Proper food hygiene
- Hygienic disposal of human excreta.

It is very difficult to achieve the last three without the achievement of the first. That is why Paul Revere saw the importance of safe drinking water, of adequate supply and pressure, connected to a sanitary sewer drainage system as key components to the minimum standards for housing.

If you depend on well water, you know that the first thing you miss with a power outage is your water supply. You can buy some drinking water. If you have some money, that is. You can’t turn on the faucet for hand washing. You can’t flush your toilet unless you can get enough water (at least a gallon) to pour a bucketful into the toilet, forcing it to flush by gravity. Rain water or melted snow can be used for this. If it is the dry season and if you don’t live near enough to a source of free water, people resort to relieving themselves outdoors and disposing of tissue and fecal matter in bags in the rubbish. The hands are in almost constant contact with bacterial contamination, as invisible as ever, and more and more surfaces become contaminated, the longer the household is without a water supply.

When you combine all these activities, you get a near perfect recipe for so many communicable diseases. Food preparation, sanitation and hygiene issues join forces to bridge the oral-fecal separation we need to maintain to stay safe.

And that is why I am given the necessary but difficult job of eventually having to tell people that their home is considered temporarily uninhabitable when they do not have a supply of safe drinking water.

I’ve had to deliver the message twice in recent weeks. So far, the message has motivated people to pay their water bill and have their water supply resumed. One man had been melting

water for flushing his toilet. He was in his own category, fortunately a minority one, in that he was so willing to avoid payments that he even risked his own life by tapping in to the power supply to his house and splicing wires to an outlet for his extension cords, thus, avoiding the electric meter! National Grid can handle that one!

Another household was able to get water for flushing the toilets from a neighbor's garden hose. When I was talking to that owner about possible options for paying her water bills, I was telling her that times had changed and municipalities could no longer afford to ignore nonpayment. I knew that there were many reasons why people did not pay water bills, though. For some, it was a new predicament related to loss of employment but for others it was more of a tradition. She admitted that she fit both categories. It's funny how honest some people are when confessing their poor judgment!

Where do people go when their house is uninhabitable? I don't know. I care but I don't know. Some health agents have had to tell people they could not live in box cars or storage pods. Paul Revere also would have told them that.

Just because there are no easy answers to complicated questions, does not mean that we drop the minimum standards for living. That would be going backwards. That is unacceptable.

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