

3-6-10 Who's Your Health Agent?

I recently received a call from the owner of a local restaurant asking if I was aware of a state ordered inspection and treatment for a rodent infestation. I was not aware of anything like that happening and asked, with some trepidation, if there was, in fact, a problem with a rodent infestation. He told me there was not. He was noticeably shaken up by his visitor, so I went to visit the place and find out what happened.

Earlier that day, a man entered the food establishment, placed a business card of a well-known pest treatment company on the counter and allegedly announced he was "sent by the State" to inspect food establishments and to "treat them for rodent infestations". The young man at the counter did the right thing by asking the claimed inspector to wait there while he notified the owner.

Now, mind you, the distance between the register counter and the owner's office is about fifteen feet. When they returned, only moments later, the inspector-pretender was in the kitchen, shining his flashlight around, now acting as an official pesticide professional and still claiming he had been sent by the "State." The owner asked for a letter explaining this inspection program. Of course, there wasn't one to produce. The owner then asked if Cathleen sent him. "Who's Cathleen?" the imposter wanted to know.

That was it. The owner was done with this guy and told him to get out, making note of the license plate as Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire drove away.

When I arrived and heard the story, I was reminded of the time some years ago that someone was overheard saying with authority in his voice, "Board of Health", "Board of Health" as he entered the deli area and proceeded to open the deli case and place his hand inside, announcing, "Just checking the temperature."

In that instance, the employees actually stepped aside and allowed that man to conduct his sham. Social psychology is an amazing thing. If one person does not speak up or react to the unusual situation, then people tend to act as a group. They all thought it was odd that there was no identity badge, no washing of the hands, no thermometer; just the sound of authority in the voice of the man pulling a prank.

In either instance more harm could have been done than just intimidation or embarrassment over falling for a prank. Food could have been poisoned very easily.

I was fortunate in the second case that the former health agent overheard the board of health announcement, looked up and saw a man she did not recognize without any identification or inspection equipment. She thought it was odd and let me know.

After meeting with the manager and the deli personnel, we were able to identify the prankster as one of the electricians working there that day. He was just having a little fun. It was a great learning experience for the manager, department manager and other employees. It allowed us the opportunity to be reminded of the importance of food security. Every person in the food handling chain, from picking the produce or cutting the meat, to rinsing it, packing it, trucking and handling it and, finally selling or serving it, all play a vital role in protecting our food supply.

In the more recent event, my instinct was that the man was trying to drum up some business for himself in the very competitive pesticide franchise trade but was going about it all wrong. And he met up with people who knew that the kitchen is a sacrosanct area and off limits to anyone without approval to be there. The foolish man was easily identified by his description and license plate by the owner of the franchise and dutifully “counseled”.

I was so thankful in both cases to have been trusted enough to be told of the events. I was thankful for people who are willing to learn and improve. I was thankful the name Cathleen meant something to the restaurant owner. I had never thought of the health agent’s name as a test for imposters.

How can you tell if there is a health inspector imposter in your town? Know who your health agent is and even better, know her name.

Go ahead; call up and say, “Hello”. In times of need we are your best friend.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. Do you know the name of yours? She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us