

6-24-11 Balance Reports

As I once again gazed in awe at my one week old granddaughter, Anna Coryn, I also celebrated Father's Day with her father, my middle son, Keith. What fun! As I thought about all that lies ahead for them, I could not help but think of the similarities of the roles and responsibilities of parents and boards of health. The father knows that his child depends on him but he also learns in time that his love is expressed in both giving and refusing, allowing and denying; tempering admonition with compassion, for what is best and necessary is the goal.

Raising six children was the best teacher I could have had for being a health agent. Parents are constantly sorting things out, weighing the consequences, preparing, explaining, explaining and explaining, while looking ahead to the desired goals.

One goal of public health is to bring balance to an out of balance situation. The path paving our way toward the solutions for many, sometimes trumps the individual rights. In a country where the idea of personal freedom is at the core of our identity, having yours waived can be a bitter pill to swallow. This scenario plays out in the classic circumstance of isolation and quarantine. When SARS (Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome) hit Canada back in 2003, a small number of exposed people were ordered to stay at home in order to prevent the spread of the disease. Protecting many from a deadly disease was seen as more important than allowing the expression of one person's right to move about with freedom.

On a less dramatic scale, local boards of health frequently deal with similar decisions, attempting to weigh out the importance of a threat and necessary steps required to reduce or eliminate it. Although boards of health have the authority and the responsibility under Massachusetts General Laws, chapter 111, section 122-131 to clear, clean, abate or condemn nuisances, it isn't always easy to know what steps to take to achieve those goals. There will be site investigations and interviews and research to determine the appropriate and reasonable outcome. What is appropriate depends on the laws regulating the situation. There may be many options or few. What is reasonable depends on many factors but most importantly, the likelihood of harm, the severity of the danger and the immediacy of the threat. Is it, as we say, an imminent health hazard? If so, we've got to scramble toward the solution/prevention/resolution as quickly as we can. Even then, it is frustrating for all parties involved, to experience delays by playing phone tag, sending and reading emails, reading up on the codes, writing letters and getting back to people with the current standing of discovery process.

When an agent finds herself at a plateau in a nuisance investigation, sometimes the best thing to do is to require an independent third party review. (They are standard protocol in numerous situations such as reviews of septic designs before they are approved.) Now, of course, this wouldn't make sense for an odor of unknown cause, or feral cats or roadside trash but when there are health or safety concerns in connection with a business activity, it can be extremely helpful. (If you know of a third party business willing and able to help with odors and trash, Please Let Me Know!)

A few years ago, an independent review of ventilation saved the day when a nail salon owner wanted to be able to provide artificial nails, in addition to just manicures and nail polish. Artificial nails require industrial strength adhesives and solvents, posing serious air quality concerns. The owner was willing to have an engineer design the negative/positive air spaces and the ventilation system required to remove the VOC's (volatile organic compounds). How

would I know if it worked? Sometimes VOC's smell, sometimes they don't. So, I asked for a Balance Report by a third party.

When the ventilation system was being checked, I decided to perform my own air test. I pointed a broom stick handle with tissue taped on the end toward the vents. It fluttered only slightly. I simply said, "I'm not very impressed." The inspection guy agreed. He then jumped into action, enclosing the vents so the air movement could be measured. The result was not what it should have been. The duct work on the roof was opened and the fan's model number called in to the distributor. It was the wrong size fan. The Balance Report proved it but a piece of toilet paper pointed us in the right direction; the direction of MIN (More Information Needed).

When there is sufficient information and the information is from a reliable source, without conflict of interest, then, finally, decisions can be made that are necessary and reliable. That knowledge might lead to necessary improvements and it also leads to relief. The concerned parties are relieved to know that their health is not being compromised and the business being reviewed is also relieved to know that their allowed business is a safe business.

Allowed is not the equivalent of safe, is it? Activities allowed by zoning do not specify how those activities should be conducted or what regulations they must comply with. When those allowed activities are called into question, the board of health may receive calls of concern along with the building department and police and fire departments.

Someday, my son will hear his daughter lament, "But, Dad, everyone is going to be there. I have to go!" and he'll have to decide. Before he decides, he'll ask some questions and check out the situation. If he needs a third party review, Grandmothers will be available.

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