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## The Harder Right or The Easier Wrong

I've heard that generals in the armed forces sometimes counsel the less experienced with the advice that it is best, in the long run, to take the course for the right thing to do, even though difficult, rather than the oh, so tempting choice of the easier way out.

I think of that "fatherly" advice frequently when it comes to public health programs (and, oh, yes, my own much respected father would have said the same). The contexts may differ but in both situations, lives are threatened and people are working hard to spare as many as possible. Anyone in the field of protection also has the challenge of crafting messages for their troops and for the public. Sometimes those announcements are difficult because they have to explain a retreat or defend a reversal of policy. If the leaders have acted out of knowledge, and as much as they could gather, then it was an informed decision. The decisions may vary as the information coming in varies. The goal is the same: Protect.

I thought of this recently when I received a call from the dispatcher on a weekend. She was apologetic about it being a Sunday but explained that this man with a sick bird in his yard would just not be appeased. I told her I did not mind. Either I could help or I couldn't but I'd be happy to try. She explained he had a bird in his yard that was apparently dying and he had already tried calling the place, the bird number, about it but there wasn't anyone there to help. I was a bit confused, so I asked, "Do you mean Audubon?" "Wildlife and Fisheries?" And then it dawned on me. The man wanted to report a soon-to-be dead bird to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. He may have called the West Nile virus hotline and was frustrated by this year's message. Birds (dead birds) are not being tested this year.

The dispatcher confirmed this guess of mine. I explained to the dispatcher that birds were no longer being tested for WNV. I did not hear back on the matter. I wonder how the discussion went. The poor woman has enough to do, tracking information and updates on car accidents, medical calls, complaints, requests for assistance and fires, without also receiving calls on sick birds. But they have taken these calls for the last nine years and now they are left saying, "That's not done anymore."

This one call from the dispatcher brought back so many memories. I was brand spanking new as a health agent when West Nile virus entered the U.S.A. in 2000. It was scary because it was new. I wanted to get the word out that the mosquitoes carrying this virus prefer to breed in containers. Thus, this disease, which tends to bring down those over fifty years old, (Yikes! Save me!) was actually very much under our control because we can control containers.

When the Massachusetts Department of Public Health began the testing program, I was thrilled because it gave everybody a chance to participate in this important scientific study. Where is the disease? Which birds are carrying it? I used to thank people for calling about dead birds, telling them every call-in was documented and that every bird with WNV became a dot on a map, documenting the spread of this disease and that, they, the concerned citizens, made that possible. That was all true, of course.

Then, while information was being gathered, various aspects of the disease became better understood and the virus itself ran into different circumstances as the birds developed immunity to it.

Have you noticed the return of the crows? They are not dying left and right from WNV but that does not mean it is not out there. WNV is out there and will be documented (along with the presence of EEE, Eastern Equine Encephalitis) by testing the carriers of this disease: the mosquitoes. Massachusetts DPH will be gathering mosquitoes and testing them, as usual, and keeping us informed as to any risks.

If we can save resources and be informed, then we have a good plan. It can feel as though we are not doing enough when we cannot have a dead bird picked up for testing. Right now is the critical time to refocus our attention. The bird was just a warning but it built up its immunity and no longer serves as a signal. The mosquito is the enemy. We can do the harder right thing by removing the containers for breeding. The easier wrong thing to do would be to walk away in frustration and say something like, "Oh, forget it then! Those state people don't want my information."

For more details on this topic, go the MA DPH website. Or, you can still call the toll free reporting line at 866-627-7968 for recordings on West Nile virus. They just don't want your dead birds.

It's easy to complain or poke fun at people. It is easy to spray pesticides. It is more difficult to be responsible for our own environment and reduce mosquito breeding grounds. I hope you will do the "harder right thing". We could use your help.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She was mortified to find mosquito larvae in her soothing sounding little patio fountain last summer! Flushing it every few days resolved the problem. She is interested in your stories and can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)