

8-16-13 An Interesting Week

It was an interesting and busy week. Actually, it always is. Every once in a while I will hear a health agent say “It’s been slow lately.” I don’t know that experience. There’s no way I can get to everything needing to be checked, inspected, followed up on, researched and read, along with receiving and returning phone calls. Returning calls and explaining all that I can about a property can be very rewarding, though, because the person is so thankful.

Some emails and phone calls are especially rewarding. Such was the case when Julie from Amherst called looking for assistance with messaging on the topic of Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE). Western Massachusetts is not accustomed to this issue. As my brother, Michael in Cape Elizabeth, Maine used to say to me, “Cathy, it’s a non-issue here.” Well, that is not the case any more for Maine, just as it is no longer a non-issue for western Mass.

Our State Department of Public Health is known throughout the country for its thorough, science-based approach to arbovirus problems and plans. Arbovirus stands for arthropod borne virus; diseases spread by exoskeleton type animals and those animals, called bugs by most of us, comprising about 90% of the animal kingdom! They have jointed (arthros, like my arthritis) legs (podos). The lobster you might have recently enjoyed is an arthropod and the tick is also an arthropod.

While the tick can carry and spread bacterial infections, DPH has the arbovirus program because of the long-standing problem in parts of Massachusetts, of viruses spread by mosquitoes, such as EEE and, since 2000, West Nile virus. DPH has traps monitoring the numbers of, the species of and the diseases being carried by mosquitoes for many decades now. It is an impressive program.

While most of their surveillance occurs in the areas of historical presence of these viruses, with the spread of WNV following in the footsteps, or should we say, following the path of water-holding containers left by humans; DPH has also discovered the recent appearance of EEE in other places for the first time.

And, so it was an honor to help another in need of information. Julie sounded like a caring and involved health agent and I wish her and her co-workers success with this new learning/teaching challenge. I hope they can explain to reporters that “pools” of mosquitoes are not pools of water. They are samples, as in statistics, of mosquitoes. We have to be accurate and educational with our messages, as EEE may be rare, but it is deadly.

Another category of interesting phone calls last week involved a request for what the man was calling a temporary food permit. Amazing Admin, Peggy, referred him to the website, where he could apply for a mobile or temporary food permit but then she had to let him know there was not enough time for the agent to discuss and inspect the operation with one week’s notice. The man applied anyway, by email. Despite the fact that their Facebook presence was

impressive, I had to explain to him our consistent policy requiring, at a minimum, a month's notice for food permits, even a "temporary" one.

Apparently, many towns and states issue these temporary food permits based on paperwork and a check. I don't understand that, unless I have met the people, inspected pre-operationally and then again during operation. So many important improvements can be made during an inspection while in operation. There are easy ways to avoid bare hand contact with ready to eat foods, even when busy, for example.

My email explaining this was met by a phone call from the "parent company" explaining they are not a "Mickey Mouse" operation and asked if I could meet someone in the parking lot to check out the mobile unit. He could not understand that I still had to interview the person and inspect during operation, which I did not have time to do this week.

The voice coming through the phone was one of astonishment, as he explained that he procures these temporary permits all over the country with only 72 hours notice. I don't issue temporary permits based on paperwork and a check, I once again explained. I also attempted to explain that it is not the appropriate or best way for me to run a department, where I drop everything, because of someone else's last minute idea, while other people and issues were placed on the back burner. This was pizza; not an emergency.

The next day, while at home, I received a call on the same matter from yet another person, where I re-explained the situation and was asked, "Would it make a difference if we paid more money for the permit?"

I was astounded. It could be the person meant well but I could help but think of the "old days" when health agents had the reputation of taking bribes to look the other way or rush through a permit. My answer was a loud, confident, definite "no"! It did not change a thing.

I wished them all well and hoped to see them in the future, with enough time to prepare and, hopefully, in a summer when EEE was not placing us at critical risk. After all, we have to at least try to do things the right and best way during ordinary times and times of emergency. Pizza is not an emergency; people sure can be persistent in trying to convince me that it is, though!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA where she receives all kinds of interesting calls. You can contact her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us