

Last Thursday evening I attended an excellent presentation at the Whitman Hanson High School on the topic of mosquitoes, Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), West Nile virus (WNV) and how our state Department of Public Health tracks, investigates and responds to the presence of these diseases. It had just the right combination of science described in layman's terminology and heartfelt "take away" messages. It was an honor to hear from Wayne Andrews, Superintendent of Bristol County Mosquito Control Program, Catherine Brown, our State Vet from DPH and Dan Daley, Community Liaison for the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program and others that night. Yet, it seems that some of the few who attended came and left with minds unchanged, hearts uninspired.

They at least had the opportunity to vent and ask questions, though, for that is one advantage of a small gathering in a large auditorium: some people find it easier to raise their hands and speak up. The speakers also have the luxury of taking their time to respond well. But, it still wasn't easy.

One woman, in particular, was angry that her daughter's soccer field had not been sprayed and she wanted to know why there wasn't a trap there, at the soccer field. It was useful to hear those comments because it revealed some assumptions and it allowed the speakers to clear up those misunderstandings.

I can understand why any parent would assume that the principal of the school could request to have the school grounds sprayed. That sounds reasonable. There is more to it than that, though. We live in a complicated world and some of those complications are the result of hard word work and lobbying from concerned parents; just like the parents I met that night. With one exception: some parents want notice if their child is to be exposed to pesticides and want the ability to keep their child away from pesticides. Thus, we have the Child Protection Act. The principal must update their Integrated Pesticide Management Plan (IPM Plan) each year, where the use of pesticides is the last choice. When they are used, the parents are given notice of at least two business days before the application.

The superintendent then explained that she makes the request for spraying, following the rules of the Child Protection Act, only for the field at "her" field; in this case, the football field. The other fields about town are owned by the town and whoever supervises them needs to speak to the Board of Health to request spraying. That can be done! Ask your Board of Health if have an area of concern.

The other area of frustration for the parents there that night was the topic of communication. The speakers listed the many ways they tried to spread the word, such as their websites, the radio and several newspapers. It was really interesting to hear the comments and complaints. "I don't get that newspaper; I only get the XXX." "I don't get any newspapers!" "I received the notice of increased risk for EEE on my Blackberry but we were just arriving at her soccer game!" Another woman asked, "Couldn't you send us a text? Couldn't I sign up for that?"

Thus arrived my first inspiration of the evening. It occurred to me that spreading the news happens through a broad spectrum of means and methods and that this spectrum is ever widening and, while it might change, it will never narrow. Currently, it is commonplace to use in times of high need, newspapers, radio,

local channel on cable, group emails, fact sheets printed and left in lobbies and libraries, and the roadside town signs, among other means, such as meetings. Those big roadside signs might not be attractive, but they sure do get the word out. I used them last year when Halifax was at High Risk for EEE. But I had never used them at a time of low risk!

The usefulness of using these signs next year early in the season was all the more evident when it was realized that evening that some people had never heard of the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program and had no idea that any resident could request ground spraying by truck of their property from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Since they had no idea that our tax dollars pay for this program, it never occurred to them to try and find a website for the program. Unknown is unseen is unused.

So I learned two very useful things that night: We must still use all the “old fashioned” methods of communicating while trying to add the new ones. We don’t have to wait for an emergency to make use good use of easy ways of informing people.

So, next year, in early June, I’ll use the roadside signs to say something like, “PlymouthMosquitoes.org They can help.” And then in early July, perhaps, “Got Mosquitoes? Call 781 585 5450 for free spraying.”

It is only one little idea, one little improvement. I’ll take it and I’ll use it. But my really big wish is for safe ways to prevent the high risk of EEE and, thus, avoid the need for aerial spraying. It can happen. There are scientists working on that now.

When my children were young, sometimes they would say things like, “I want to invent something!” Then, as they grew, they began to think that everything worth inventing was already invented. That is not so! We do have to keep our ears and eyes open for what is needed or what is simply mysterious and not understood. We need to be open to inspiration.

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