

ONTARIO BRANCH NEWS



FALL 2007

The Role of Education in Shaping Public Health Inspectors

By Andrew Papadopoulos, B.A.Sc., MBA CPHI (C)

There is a belief that knowledge is power. If that belief holds true, then it is education that fuels that power. The education of Public Health Inspectors has come a long way over the past half-century. At one point in time, a person could practice as a Public Health Inspector in Canada after studying for one year in a post-secondary institution. Two years of post-secondary study was later required and then amended to a three year requirement. Currently, a four-year degree is the minimum requirement to become a certified Public Health Inspector. Some people question whether this current four year degree is a disproportionately low level of education to perform the job, while others feel that a higher level of education is necessary.

The complexity of the work of Public Health Inspectors continues to increase with the emergence of new diseases and unique challenges. It is often stated that public health is only visible in the time of crisis and invisible when it is effectively reducing illness and mitigating health hazards within its community. If we can summarize the role of the Public Health Inspector within his or her community, it is to investigate health hazards and take actions to mitigate their negative impact on the health of the population. An element of the job that has evolved, and in fact, has become extremely difficult to deal with is the multilevel nuances that an inspector must account for while taking those necessary actions.

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Editorial Team**Heather Richards**

Toronto Public Health
235 Danforth Avenue
3rd Floor Toronto, ON, M4K 1N2
tel: (416) 392-0936 fax: (416) 392-0714
communications@ciphi.on.ca

Melanie Azeff

Toronto Public Health
44 Victoria Avenue, 18th Floor
Toronto, ON, M5B 1W2
Tel: (416) 392-7685 fax: (416) 338-1643

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Mailing Address: Attention: Heather Richards
C/O Toronto Public Health
235 Danforth Ave., 3rd Flr
Toronto, ON M4K 1N2

Submissions Criteria:

- All topics must be relevant to the Public Health Inspection Field
- Articles must be submitted either on computer disk or by e-mail in MS Word (written articles will not be accepted).
- Articles submitted should be approximately 150 words (feature articles a maximum of 500 words).
- Feature articles will be determined by the OBN editorial team.
- Graphics or pictures included with the submission must be a resolution of 150—300 dpi.
- Articles must be submitted by the deadlines outlined below

Ontario Branch Executive—Councillors 2006-2007**President—Adam Grant**

Ministry of the Environment
e-mail: president@ciphi.on.ca
tel: (519) 873-5090 fax: (519) 873-5096

Past President—Mike Duncan

North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit
e-mail: pastpresident@ciphi.on.ca
Box 484, 17 Copeland St., Burk's Falls, ON P0A 1C0
tel: (705) 382-2018 fax: (705) 382-2931

President Elect—Peter Heywood

Region of Waterloo Public Health
e-mail: pres-elect@ciphi.on.ca
150 Main St., 3rd Floor, Cambridge, ON, N1R 6P9
tel: (519) 883-2008 ext. 3484 fax: (519) 622-1235

Communicable Disease—Lucie Imbiscuso

Wellington-Dufferin Guelph Health Unit
email: communicable@ciphi.on.ca
125 Delhi St., Guelph ON N1E 4J5
tel: (519) 846-2715 ext. 4632 fax: (519)836-7215

Food Safety—Ken Diplock

Region of Waterloo Public Health
email: foodsafety@ciphi.on.ca
99 Regina St. South, Waterloo, ON N2J 4V3
tel: (519) 883-2008 ext.5435 fax: (519) 883-2226

Healthy Environments—Sandi Amorim-Daly

Brant County Health Unit
email: healthyenviro@ciphi.on.ca
194 Terrace Hill, Brantford, ON N3R 1G7
tel: (519) 753-4937 ext. 305 fax: (519) 753-2140

Health Promotion & Professional Devel.—Shawna Bourne

Ministry of the Environment
e-mail: healthpromo@ciphi.on.ca
tel: (519) 873-5122 fax:(519) 873-5096

Membership Services—Dennis Persaud

Region of Peel Health
email: membership@ciphi.on.ca
55 Standish Court, 5th Floor Mississauga, ON L5R 4B2
tel: (905) 791-7800 ext.7527 fax:(905)501-0305

Partnership Liaison—Fran Gelder

Simcoe County District Health Unit
email: partnership@ciphi.on.ca
15 Sperling Dr., Barrie, ON, L4M 6K9
tel: (519) 721-7330 ext.287 fax: (519) 721-1495

Secretary-Treasurer-Barbara Krar

treasurer@ciphi.on.ca



Message from the Editor

Hello, fall!

*The activities swirling around the autumn season are to prepare us for packing it in for the long haul. Fall always feels like when real life happens. Gone are the hedonistic carefree days of summer; it's time to hunker down and get to work. For those of us who spend their time more **in** rather than **out** of school, fall also feels like the start of the new year.*

Here at the OBN we have gone back to school, too—to visit, at least. Walking the halls at Ryerson University, where a large percentage of environmental health professionals begin their career, brought back some memories and resonated so profoundly, we decided to theme this issue around the pursuit of learning.

*It all started with the article on education on page 1 by **Andrew Papadopoulos** (continued on page 5). We have also included our talk with the students at Ryerson; they have a lot to say on pages 6 to 7. **Shawna Bourne** takes the CPHI (C) further than the health agency. To find out where, turn to page 9. In the spirit of learning, **Dr. Peter Berry** informs us on the public health impact of climate change. And lastly, your past president **Mike Duncan** has a question for you to ponder; turn to page 10. Enjoy the read!*

Goodbye, all!

This is the last edition of the OBN that will be completed by this editorial team. A huge thank you to all of the OBN readers, supporters, dissenters; it has been a real pleasure.

Working with the CIPHI Ontario Branch Executive has been quite an eye opener. The work needed to push our profession forward is quite relentless, without any breaks. The people rising to the challenge, toiling away behind the scenes are quite remarkable. So, if there are times where you begin to feel disillusioned by the work or disheartened by the public, or even the worse of all sins, by a colleague or supervisor; take heart. When the Executive gets together to discuss the advancement of environmental health professionals, at times, there can be real magic in the room. I have witnessed it and it is awe inspiring.

*Heather Richards,
Editor OBN*

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Letters to the Editor...

In the *Summer 2007 issue of the OBN* the Past President Mike Duncan asked:

Considering the system above, what will it take to move the Public Health in Ontario to consider the use of viable information technology to support Environmental Health programming?

Your response:

What will it take? Another Walkerton? Perhaps another tainted food supply courtesy of poor sanitary standards? How about overworked and in-efficient Health Inspectors dealing with poorly designed work scheduling from management? We here at the Sault Ste Marie Innovation Centre have taken up these challenge to Human Health by using the power of GIS, cooperative partners in the community, data sharing, and the desire to better improve the human condition.

Knowledge really is power, and we have used our knowledge to combat socio-economic distress and improve health care and provide services to the health professionals who are charged with maintaining a healthy populace.

Cheers,

Ken Lee

Thanks for writing!

To submit comments, questions and any other letter to the editor, please email communications@cphi.on.ca or post mail to Heather Richards 235 Danforth Ave., 3rd Floor, Toronto, ON M4K 1N2

Education...continued from page 1

The number of public health crises have increased over the past several years. Various commissions have been held and numerous reports have been authored in response to those emergencies. Education of public health professionals has been a point of discussion in every case.

Each crisis has demonstrated that the public health sector is involved in many activities in an ever-changing environment. New diseases, both communicable and non-communicable, continue to fall under the purview of public health. While these items are added to the workload, old ones have not been removed.

It is very difficult for a Public Health Inspector to stay informed and educated in all aspects of their employment. Information dissemination, knowledge transfer and other means of sharing successful initiatives must become commonplace. For Public Health Inspectors to continue to be well respected and up-to-date in their information, education must take a larger role than it currently holds. A formal network that allows Public Health Inspectors to maintain currency in new and emerging issues and continue to be knowledgeable in traditional areas will move the profession forward and maintain, or even enhance, its current level of credibility within public health and with its external stakeholders.

The School of Occupational and Public Health at Ryerson University has evolved with the profession. It has attempted to maintain currency by providing up-to-date, practical information, as well as, theoretical learning. Providing the theoretical knowledge presents students with a fundamental foundation of education – the information necessary for students to understand the subject matter. Prac-

tical cases and examples help the learning environment by providing students with tangible problems and questions they may face during their professional careers.

The role of practicum training in education cannot be underestimated. Schooling provides knowledge and technical training, sometimes in a black and white manner; however, we know that public health solutions are usually grey. This type of knowledge can only be gained through experience in the field.

The term evidence-based is becoming very popular and in fact, is becoming the norm in program development in public health. Understanding how to use evidence in program development and implementation has become critical. Public health inspectors need to understand what is evidence, when it is accurate, how much is needed and how to use it. Being more scientific can enhance public health programs.

Most other disciplines within public health have graduate programs and therefore many of those working in leadership roles in public health also have postgraduate education. With this in mind, the School of Occupational and Public Health has developed a post-graduate certificate in Environmental Public Health Leadership. This certificate is based on the core competencies for public health that are being developed through the Public Health Agency of Canada.

To continue to be effective in their field, Public Health Inspectors must seek out opportunities to enhance their education and continue to be leaders within public health. This will move the entire profession forward.



Ryerson Students Speak Out

The OBN gathered at Ryerson University with a cross-section of students in the second year of the fast-track program (the four year degree offered in two years for students with university degrees) of the Public Health stream at the School of Occupational and Public Health. It seemed the time to let them speak out.

Those in the profession have been speculating about the students from the moment they have arrived in the health agency for their practicum. As well, with the recent pass/fail numbers at the Board of Certification, everyone is abuzz. From most accounts, the speculation rests between a potential disconnect between the theory taught at school and the crunch of the practical field experience. Well, the students also had a lot to say.

The First Year

The harshest words appear to be about the curriculum for the first year. Their general consensus is that the curriculum needs to be reviewed and revised and that it is too easy, feels like high school. The reason, they feel, may be because they are roped in with the

other undergraduates who are fresh out of high school (and can be as young as 17) and need that bridge to gently move from a high school to a university environment.

These graduates are quite clear that they do not need coddling. To them the curriculum at times can be repetitive and there are a number of courses they feel they do not need to take. For example, there seems to be an overload of food courses and while they acknowledge that the majority of Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) work in food safety in some capacity, they stress that there are other areas of public health which are not given their fair due on the curriculum and need to be “driven home”.

Relevance of the Courses

It is not always obvious to the student how much of the work they are learning is relevant to the job they will be doing as an environmental health professional.

They feel there needs to a more solid connection to the outside world and current events and they should be kept up to date by

teaching staff. For example, they recall major outbreaks which occurred during the school year but were not discussed in their classes but may have been an effective tool to illustrate the role of a PHI.

The Faculty

There are educators who clearly do not feel confident in teaching and relating to the students, and it shows. In order for the faculty at the administrative level to assess the capability of the teaching staff, they feel the teacher evaluations completed by the students should be longer and more comprehensive, asking the right questions.

Testing, Testing

They were quite clear and in agreement that multiple choice is not a test of their skills and readily admitted to studying and regurgitating information for the test that may not be remembered later. Short answer questions would be an improvement so that they are forced to understand and

explain what they have learned. Everyone loved and was enthusiastic about the assignments where they are given a map of a restaurant and conducted mock inspections. It was a taste of real life in the field but unfortunately those opportunities do not come up often enough.

Communication is Key

The students are well aware and acknowledge that 100% of the job is communication. They are not certain this is being adequately addressed. They feel they require skills to know what to do when a client is confrontational, angry or unreasonable. "If it's going to be theory driven then it would be best served on confidence and communication skills."

Final Words

"They are teaching us to assess everything but yet they are not assessing whether or not the program works. They must learn to practice what they preach."



Reducing the Health Impacts of Climate Change
By Dr. Peter Berry, Health Canada



“Many diseases and health problems that may be exacerbated by climate change can be effectively prevented with adequate financial and human public health resources, including training, surveillance and emergency response, prevention and control programs.” (Summary for Policy Makers of IPCC Working Group 11 Report , page 62)

Due to the evidence that climate change is occurring at a rapid rate, Canadians can expect an increase in risk to their health from a range of environmental hazards influenced by the increase climate change.

Climate extremes such as drought, floods, heat waves, cold snaps, hurricanes, and ice storms which currently have an impact the health and well-being of Canadians, are now expected to lead to an increased risk in morbidity such as injury, illness, stress-related disorders and mortality. Infectious disease vectors have been projected to spread further geographically across Canada as the

temperature warms. Compounded together, these risks can have a significant impact on the health of the population and the systems in place to protect it.

While Canadian communities may be overwhelmed by extreme climatic events, many at risks groups in our societies (for example, seniors, children, socially disadvantaged) may be most vulnerable to climate shifts.

Adaptive strategies to protect public health from climate change are needed now.

Given the breadth of the expected consequences, public health authorities will need to invest in a range of programs to protect populations such as primary health care, mental health services, disease monitoring and surveillance, housing and shelter, children’s environmental health, healthy living and emergency health response.

An immediate focus is also required to ensure existing control measures are effective in changing individual behaviour through education, that there are well coordinated relationships between partnering agencies, and the measures in place are flexible enough to respond to new information about changing health risks.

Luckily, Canada possesses the scientific, financial, human and technological capacity to utilize emerging information about the health risks to develop its economy and society in ways to protect public health.

Translating the PHI Experience into other Professional Careers

By Shawna Bourne B.A.Sc., MHA, CPHI (C)

The choice most university students make when graduating from an Environmental Health Program in Ontario is a career as a Public Health Inspector (PHI) within the local health unit. In fact, students of environmental health are groomed for a prescribed career path in the local health unit by faculty and staff. It is a career path that has the potential to be varied and interesting, requiring a level of skill, knowledge, initiative and autonomy that many would relish in the average 9-5 work week.

Although a career as a Public Health Inspector offers many positive features most who have worked as a PHI recognize that the “usual” work week is not the typical experience in the field, the salary range does not effectively reflect the level of skill required, nor does it reflect the level commitment necessary to perform this important position effectively.

As a certified PHI, I have worked in various capacities in different health units. However, in 2002, I made the decision begin to seek out work in other areas that would be of interest to me, provide me with a more balanced work and family life, have aspects of the PHI role that I enjoy and provide me with the opportunity to hone and develop new skills.

My intention was to remain within the field of environmental health (in its broadest sense) while taking on a role that would allow me to continue on in those areas that I loved the best at the health unit such as emergency response, teaching, research, collaborating with stakeholders, committee work and enforcing regulations. However, I also wanted to further develop my skills in the areas of leading, coaching, policy development and financial management.

With these considerations in mind I set my sleuthing skills to work to seek out a new position. Later that year, I was offered the position of Drinking Water Program Supervisor for a local office of the Ministry of the Environment. Many of my personal and professional needs would be met at this new position, including academic support

When considering a change, there are many areas to which a PHI could effectively transfer their skills. A short list of possibilities include: academia, government, research institutes, non-government organizations (NGOs), or private sector positions. In fact, there are a myriad of choices and locations around the world where PHI skills could be used and is only limited by the individual PHI imagination and personal preference.

When considering a leap of faith and transferring PHI skills to a new position, the PHI should consider, as a guide, the things that they enjoy (and despise) about their job, areas in which they excel (and which they need to improve) and how their work effects their lives positively (and/or negatively).

Some of the key skills that (almost) all PHIs can be guaranteed to have include problem solving skills, strong written and oral communication skills (sometimes in multiple languages!), the ability to sell ideas, the ability to work well independently and with others (usually), time management skills, the ability to handle criticism and most importantly, the ability to work well under pressure.

These are some of the most desirable skills across the board and they can be effectively translated into many positions. As a qualified and experienced PHI, the world could be your oyster. You just have to know what you want and seek it out.

The Past President Asks...

Overview

Environmental Public Health Professionals routinely apply a range of public health protection services in our communities on a daily basis. In the case of our colleagues employed with a public health agency in Ontario, this involves applying provincial public health legislation in a variety of community settings.

In the past, some clients within the jurisdiction of our provincial public health agencies have complained of inconsistency regarding the agency's application (interpretation) of the legislation.

Such inconsistencies in the application of each health agency's mandate can frustrate clients and negatively affect the credibility of our public health agencies. Over the years some agencies have strived to encourage consistency in professional practice through implementing a range of quality control measures including enhanced data collection/management, internal/external policy development based on best or informed practice and general program auditing measures.

Question

Considering the above points what other initiatives/methods would assist our public health agencies in becoming more consistent in applying our health protection mandate?

So, what do you think about this? Drop a line to your **Past President Michael Duncan** at pastpresident@ciphi.on.ca



Ontario Branch News

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Look for our Next Issue..... Winter 2007

If there is anything that you would like to see in the OBN let us know. Contact the OBN editor at: communications@ciphi.on.ca



C/O

Heather Richards
235 Danforth Avenue
3rd Floor
Toronto, ON
M4K 1N2



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 Phone (519) 883-2008 ext. 3484
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