

EDITORIAL PAGE

The thoughts and opinions expressed on this page are designed to stimulate thoughts and opinions from National Environmental Health Association readers and do not necessarily conform to the consensus of the organization, nor are they stated policy of the organization.

Journal of Environmental Health, May/June 1976

By Larry Gordon, Assistant Editor

ENVIRONMENTAL EPIDEMIOLOGIST NEEDED

Far the past several years, there has been a cry to "get the health back in the environment." Environmental health professional have bemoaned the loss of programs to seemingly non-health oriented agencies. Environmental health leaders have expressed concern about basing environmental protection standards and regulations on such factors as property damage, economics, damage to plants and animals, technological capabilities, and esthetics rather than on damage to the health of humans.

For those on the firing line, however, and for those charged with preparing and justifying expert testimony to support, environmental standards before an appropriate board or court, the cold facts have often forced a course based on utilizing evidence other than health facts. More simply stated, we don't know enough about human ecology - the interrelationship between the human animal and his environment. Even more specifically, we don't know enough about environmental epidemiology.

When we have resorted to basing programs on non-health factors, we have implicitly admitted a major knowledge gap. As an example, it may have been more fruitful to base certain water pollution standards on studies proving damage to the biota of the receiving watercourse or body of water. However, few professionals educated and experienced in ecology and environmental health would disagree with the assumption that the same level vi pollutants cause clinical or subclinical somatic or genetic damage to the human animal. Numerous events continue to prove that we must know more about the acute and chronic effects of pollutants, additives, radiation, environmental chemicals, congestion, noise, housing, and other environmental factors on the health of this and future generations.

The environmental epidemiologist is a necessary new breed. Not that we haven't had a few among our ranks, but they are the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, graduate level environmental health institutions have been producing graduates trained to work in today's existing agency programs, rather than educating individuals to prevent present and future environmental health problems. Developing strong and innovative environmental epidemiology curricula should be a major thrust of schools of environmental health and other institutions engaged in graduate environmental health education. Furthermore, environmental health and environmental protection agencies must recognize the knowledge gap and utilize fully the talents of such new professionals. Only then will we be capable of "getting health back in the environment."