Environmental Quality and the Community Health Educator

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Community health educators have traditionally been advocates of community concerns and needs within a variety of institutions and organizations. Because of this function, educators now find themselves caught in the middle of a growing wave of public discontent. Throughout the United States, the feeling that too many things have gone wrong has broadened and deepened (*1*). One result of this national anxiety is a rising demand by people for a more direct role in correcting deficiencies they see and in creating a better quality of life. They see their environment as an essential part of the quality of their lives and feel that human capacities cannot flourish when environmental marauders assault their lives and run our ecosphere amuck. Michener agrees: "The

quality of a good life depends in large measure on how a man reacts to his natural environment, . . . we cannot destroy one without diminishing the other" (*2*).

The seriousness of this public unrest and the desire to set the environment right again has been recognized by many health educators, particularly those who want to commit themselves to the task of improving the environmental quality. Educators who wish to lead in this task and serve as community advocates must look carefully at the directions such a commitment will take them. They should ask themselves two basic questions. Where will I begin work and what are some of the ways I can effectively approach complex environmental issues?

Whatever course a health educator takes will depend, in part, on the nature of the local environmental problems and the particular political, social, cultural, and economic milieu in which the problems are embedded. For this reason, a procedural blueprint will be of little value.

The focal point of my paper, then, will be an attempt to analyze the questions of where and how educators can dig in, particularly at the local level, in order to make a favorable impact on the quality of the environment and to point out some problems and resources related to each question.

Where do educators begin? In turning to this question, rather than getting bogged down in the myriad of possible agencies and programs, I will look instead at two broad categories: governmental institutions and quasi- or nongovernmental institutions.

Impact of the New Official Agencies

A profusion of new agencies and programs is being created to do planning and to solve environmental problems at all governmental levels—environmental protection agencies, regional councils, and comprehensive health planning agencies. Some of these stand in place of, alongside of, and sometimes in conflict with other older organizations with responsibilities for environmental quality, such as local and State health departments.

In a sense, these new organizations and institutions have had both a good and a bad effect, at least at the local level. The bad effect is that they have aided in the fragmentation and demise of public health as a multifaceted, coordinated system primarily embodied in local and State health departments. A natural result of this demise is that health, as an important aspect of environmental programs, is often left out by new organizations (*3*).

We in the health field can take heed of our highly visible and organized conservationist brothers and sisters. They seem to have had more of an impact on official environmental organizations and governing bodies in preserving wildlife and natural resources than the health industry has had in fostering a quality of health and life for man.

This lack of impact by public health workers was demonstrated in a minor way by the actions of a respected Missouri legislator in 1971. In his proposal for a board to oversee statewide environmental programs, he listed representatives of conservation organizations, consumer groups, and so forth as desirable members. When asked why no one from the public health field was included, he said he considered those persons a special interest group—the kind of group he wanted excluded.

The emergence of new environmental institutions has also had good effects. Regional approaches are being developed by some of these organizations to handle interrelated environmental programs and problems in a coordinated, comprehensive manner for large geographic areas.

Opportunities in Official Agencies

It is apparent that governmental institutions, in their varieties of structure, offer educators many opportunities to create effective programs in environmental education. Usually these institutions are legally charged with carrying out environmental protection programs, including the enforcement of laws and regulations. Hence, they can carry great clout in attacking environmental problems, and they are where the action is.

One of the great challenges of working in governmental agencies is that they must confront the environmental problems and actually do something about them. They are the ones who must respond to the people. This matter of accountability is difficult, for governmental agencies have an entire population as their constituency. They are faced with multidemands—some of them contradictory—from many segments of the population. These factors set governmental agencies apart from other groups and organizations who do not have to deal directly with environmental problems and account to a much narrower con-

stituency. It is easy to offer solutions such as doing away with all pesticides or all highways if you do not have to answer to the people for the consequences of your actions. Government has to answer.

I suggest that education has an important function in environmental programs in government, especially in developing constructive interaction between the programs and the people. This point is demonstrated by the achievements of health education in the early stages of the air pollution control program in St. Louis County, Mo.

The approach in this program avoided reliance on publicity techniques and a technical emphasis. Information was geared so that people could understand and see how it related to them. A long-range plan was developed around education before and after legislative action. Major objectives and activities centered around gaining (*a*) community support for the passage of adequate legislation, (*b*) citizens' understanding of the new ordinance and what they could do to alleviate air pollution, (*c*) better relations with industry, and (*d*) better communication among air pollution agencies themselves and between these agencies and the public. One of the first and best campaigns aimed at getting citizens to stop burning leaves. Although leaf burning was a relatively minor source of pollution, the response of the people to something they could do was such that most people complied with the new ordinance a full year before they had to. At the same time, they were given practical, specific alternatives to leaf burning (*4*).

Limiting Factors of Official Agencies

There are also limitations within official agencies in trying to construct environmental education campaigns. Some of these limitations suggest reasons why there is little demand for community health educators in environmental control programs.

One impediment may be the narrow view of health education that environmental control staffs often hold. These staffs are frequently engineers and technicians whose training prepares them to be more naturally concerned with technological systems and enforcement activities than education. They may be unaware of the full educational dimensions of their programs. What often occurs is an attempt to put stress on projecting a favorable image of a program and disseminating information through various means such as the press, annual reports, pamphlets, and speakers. While public relations are an essential part of an agency's functions, such activities do not add up to a complete community education program.

Even if an agency has an educational staff, it is likely to be small and its efforts are spread too thin. Daily demands may leave little time to develop new programs and to demonstrate effectively the value of health education (*5*).

A second impediment to educational programs is at the conception stage. Frequently, educational components are not written into a project's guidelines or plans at the Federal level, nor in grant applications originating in local organizations. The result is that, at the planning stage, little or no money is earmarked for staff and programs in education.

To remedy this omission, health educators can exert their influence in selling education as an essential part of environmental programs. This influencing could probably best be done at the Federal level through the efforts of national professional organizations such as the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) and through health education professionals of the American Public Health Association. Chapters of SOPHE or other local organizations, such as health education sections of State public health associations, could make a similar attempt at other levels.

Educators should look at one other aspect of official agencies. Although working for such an institution can give them more influence in their community work, the agency is tied into a larger governmental system in which the decision-making process is generally politically based. There is a resulting natural concern for the agency's image and for good public relations. This is not to say there is not also a concern for good governmental programs. There often is; however, the politically directed decisions of governmental or elected officials may result in different kinds of reactions and approaches to environmental problems by these officials.

Some of these reactions may result in the familiar "don't let the cat out of the bag" approach, which can stop an educator dead in his tracks, and the "wham bam" approach. This approach is usually a short term, high-speed campaign to get voter support for particular issues. Such a campaign can work if it is geared to what the public wants to begin with. An unfortunate example is a recent failure of St. Louis County voters to pass a county charter

amendment which would have set up county-wide minimum housing and building codes necessary to curb urban blight.

Housing was and is a complex issue in St. Louis County, as elsewhere in the nation. The local issue involved economic, racial, political, and cultural aspects intertwined with various levels of public understanding and different value systems, as well as fears, misinformation, and organized local political leaders crying "galloping socialism." The campaign to sell the amendments to the county's citizens was attempted in approximately 2 months before the vote. This quickie attempt was unfortunate, since there were many excellent resources within government and in the communities on which to build a broadly based community education program to promote the codes—but not in 2 months. Perhaps the vote would have been a failure in any case, but with the shotgun approach used, the charter amendment had little chance to win approval.

The political nature of some decision making within a governmental structure can also work to the educator's advantage in getting things done. Elected officials are more likely to respond to demands from their constituents than from anyone else. Although this factor may entail the educator's taking a back door route to reach governmental leaders, it can work well if he has done his job as a community advocate in helping communities voice their needs and desires effectively.

A University Role—Environmental Education

The quasi- or nongovernmental institutions also offer a variety of opportunities for health educators to launch environmental action programs. A good example is the university.

In Missouri the university is increasingly filling the educational role, unheeded or underdeveloped, for whatever reasons, by official environmental protection organizations. Locally the university is emerging as a force in environmental education for several reasons:

1. The university understands the role and power of education
2. Like many voluntary organizations, the university is sometimes freer from political restraints than governmental agencies
3. In its traditionally prestigious role as "educator," the university is often in a better position to develop more innovative programs
4. More money is naturally allotted for educational purposes
5. It is less threatened by controversial subjects
6. The university has built-in manpower in a variety of capacities.

The University of Missouri's Environmental Quality Program is an example of an academic institution's contribution toward improving the quality of life. The program is administered through the university's extension service and has a staff of educators assigned to areas throughout the State. Its major focus is to help citizens understand the nature of environmental problems and to help them examine alternatives in solving these problems.

In working through the extension service, the environmental quality program serves as a collection and funneling point for all the resources of the university. Its staff perform an important liaison function because they are in a position to coordinate university resources and activities so they can meet specific community environmental education needs. Environmental educators, in turn, work in communities to provide (*a*) teacher training centering on environmental issues, (*b*) professional development programs concerning special environmental problems, and (*c*) workshops and conferences on a variety of subjects and issues.

Among its many environmental activities, the university also published a school study guide in 1971 entitled "Our Environment," which is geared to the junior high school level; problems are discussed primarily from national and State viewpoints. This guide has now been accepted for use by university extension services in any State (*6*).

Choosing Approaches to Problems

We know that solutions to problems affecting environmental quality require more sophisticated approaches than ever before, including educational approaches. Regardless of where educators work or their titles, there are certain directions they should consider in dealing with complicated environmental problems. A variety of possibilities are open to health educators today in constructing methodologies. These choices include:

1. Selecting from among more traditional education processes
2. Creating strategies that involve political or social intervention
3. Working through organized consumer, con-

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servation, and other groups concerned with environmental quality

4. A combination of some or all of these.

I will touch on these points in the following discussion.

Educational Strategies and Politics

Environmental problems are such that the educator needs to create more complex educational strategies than in the past. Strategies will frequently have to take into account the difficult economic, social, technological, cultural, legal, and political components which are as interrelated as the environmental problems themselves.

The political component alone complicates environmental problems immeasurably. Environmental problems often cut across a number of governmental levels and political systems, each with its own viewpoints and concerns. Therefore, educators who want to get results must work more effectively within the political structure so that forces of intervention can be better applied.

An attempt to work within the political system was made by a broad coalition of St. Louis Metropolitan Area citizens in 1970 and 1971. This attempt was concerned with the lead paint poisoning of children in the inner city. In initial casefinding efforts in high-risk St. Louis neighborhoods 41 percent, or 1,239, of the 3,025 children tested between June 28, 1970, and April 24, 1971, had abnormally high blood lead levels. It was also found that St. Louis' new lead poisoning ordinance was not being enforced owing to lack of funds and staff, that casefinding was too limited, and that medical care and prevention activities, including educational efforts, were confused and sporadic. At this point, several community groups, as well as the St. Louis Health Department and the local medical establishment, called city officials to task for failing to take

leadership in correcting the lead poisoning hazards.

The need for action was apparent. As a result, the educational staff of the University of Missouri Extension Division and the Department of Community Medicine of St. Louis University's School of Medicine decided to organize a conference on lead poisoning. It was felt such a conference should have two basic goals: to develop a true coalition of persons who wanted to stop lead poisoning and to bring about constructive action to get at all aspects of the problem. Their efforts culminated in a "Get the Lead Out" conference sponsored by 51 groups, agencies, and city offices, as well as 15 State representatives and two State senators. The planning and execution of the conference centered around four major task forces—medical, education, housing, and legal. People from a variety of fields—politics, health, housing, law, education, and the environment—as well as representatives of citizen and student groups met head on in small working sessions and in larger assemblies. Here they carefully pinpointed special problems and needs in each of the four areas. Concrete resolutions for action were generated and a multifaceted attack on a tragic problem was finally launched (7).

People say they want more control over their own lives and a say in the decisions that affect them. As the "Get the Lead Out" conference illustrates, they need to participate more actively in the political system to achieve their goals, and educators may be called upon to guide them. Time and again educators will find themselves explaining how to get something accomplished in our governmental structure, what laws or legal restraints exist or are needed, who has power and control over what, and with whom citizens should communicate in order to be heard.

Educators must also understand that they need to initiate frequent and articulate communication with legislators and other political leaders. This task is often ignored, a particularly unfortunate omission in instances where political representatives welcome expertise, information, and support regarding measures they wish to undertake to improve environmental quality.

Helping People to Effect Change

Educators can move in a number of other ways within their natural habitat—the community—to develop an active and constructive public response to the environmental crisis. In our society of accelerating change, educators have a responsibility to help people not only cope with change so they do not become immobilized and discouraged by it, but also to help them bring about change themselves. Hysterics and doomsday criers are not needed, but rather intelligent, constructive action by many people.

Part and parcel of bringing about constructive action for change is creating an enlightened public demand for those actions that people see as improving their environment. Educators can foster this demand by seeing that information about environmental problems, and resources to deal with such problems, are accessible to people. Help to define the real parameters of environmental problems within communities is also a need. In the same vein, educators can aid communities and individual persons to define their responsibilities. The responsibilities of communities and their citizens to combat water pollution illustrate these points.

Since municipal sewage is a major source of water pollution, local government is the key element in pollution control. Communities need adequate sewer systems for proper treatment of wastes before they are discharged into a waterway. Community planning is also essential to insure that new housing developments and industries have proper sewage and waste disposal facilities so that pollution will be prevented as the community grows. The provision of sewage facilities can be a confusing issue. Procedures and resources needed to control water pollution often need to be clarified. Massive community support and outlays of money may be required.

Community health educators can also apply their expertise in community organization and in other methods to facilitate change. An organized people can make their preferences known with more clout. The public may decide, for instance, that noise is an undesirable intruder into its life. Yet, few structures—governmental or otherwise—are organized for dealing with noise effectively. In such cases, collective action can be directed toward seeing that the problem-solving mechanisms are set up or at least lending a hand to shaky beginnings of new programs.

Finally, we health educators must be careful how we define environmental problems. Problems must be separated into manageable segments so that people will feel they can actually do something that will make a difference. The first Earth Week created a lot of simplistic environmental

rhetoric, most of it geared to a national outlook. This oratory has its place, particularly in creating awareness, which Earth Week did with resounding success. However, it left many people saying, ". . . but what can WE do?!" They felt impotent and isolated as individuals and small groups in the face of massive national needs. They began to search for projects they could carry out in their communities. They found there was little or no information about the local environmental problems or "backyard" issues which they felt they could handle.

This was the situation in St. Louis County, and it prompted the health department's educational and environmental staff to publish a study unit on environment and health for teachers and community groups. The unit attempted to (*a*) describe some of the county's major environmental problems, (*b*) define current responsibilities for solving them, and (*c*) assist people to see the many facets of local pollution issues. Demand for the unit from schools and organizations in the county was proof of the need for this kind of help.

Understanding the Interrelationships

Community health educators must make opportunities in their community work where or whenever possible to help the public see and solve environmental problems in an interrelated way. Air pollution is an example of why it is necessary to define interrelationships.

People abhor air pollution and want it stopped. Yet in many areas they are demanding more roads to accommodate the proliferation of automobiles, and they continue to buy cars with high compression engines which are among the worst polluters. The flight to the good life in suburbia to escape urban decay has made it necessary for more people to travel increasing distances to and from their suburban homes and places of work in the cities. Commoner noted that automobile vehicle miles traveled within metropolitan areas have increased from 1,050 annually per capita in 1946 to 1,790 in 1966 (*8*).

Apart from desiring the personal mobility a car affords, most people hate to give up their independence in its use. These are our cultural and social hangups. People will soon have to weigh seriously the benefits and hazards of their choices that contribute to air pollution. To complicate the picture further, good transportation alternatives to the automobile will not come about until the public is willing to support mass transportation systems.

Working with Consumer Movements

An important movement gathering strength in the country is the consumer movement which consists of consumers who are through with buying bad products, bad services, bad government, and a bad environment. The movement is taking many directions and forms both nationally and locally. Witness Nader's Raiders or the citizens' lobby, Common Cause, which is working to reshape national priorities and programs including those relating to environmental quality (*9*). Conservation organizations also have come into greater prominence and greater battles. All these are signs that people want a more direct role to achieve their expectations for environmental quality and in other issues.

Local branches of national citizen advocacy and conservation organizations, as well as strictly local groups organized around environmental or related concerns, can be excellent allies to public health and environmental control agencies. Educators should serve as liaison personnel between these organizations and other institutions for at least two important reasons. First, some groups are large, vocal, and strong enough to have political clout or at least the ears of legislators and other political leaders. They can, therefore, be forceful intervenors in the political system when this kind of intervention is needed to bring about environmental changes. Second, they can also be effective educators of others.

A distinguished example of the political and educational effectiveness of organizations is the League of Women Voters. Although the league's primary purpose is not environmental, environmental affairs are certainly one of its major interests. The league, nationally and through its local branches, has been invaluable in clarifying environmental issues for the public as well as gathering necessary support to pass needed legislation.

Working with environmental activist groups, however, is not without risks. Their political and educational activities make it all the more imperative for them to receive sound input from environmental control programs. This input is needed to coordinate objectives and programs for greater impact on our environmental problems and to head off moves in unrealistic directions or actions

which might run counter to more constructive activities.

McKinney warns, for instance, of the "ecological con man" (*10*). "More than ever before there is a general awareness by the public of environmental pollution . . . [but] The environmental con men have stepped in and diverted public attention from the real job to be done." These con men are likely to propose quick and easy solutions to such difficult problems as solid waste disposal. They may suggest that we can recycle all materials NOW, arouse their followers, and lead them down the path to frustration and hopelessness.

Apart from the con men, consumer and citizen advocacy groups exercising their right to make their desires known are a constructive force in society. We should not only welcome but seize the opportunity to work with them. In St. Louis County, for example, the work of numerous environmental groups has been invaluable. They have attacked the solid waste problem by (*a*) mounting educational campaigns to convince the public of the need for recycling materials and the waste created by disposable or overpackaged goods, (*b*) helping communities and municipal leaders set up collection centers and convincing the people to use them, and (*c*) pressuring and working with local industries to accept materials for recycling and to make the returning process convenient to the public. The list of accomplishments in other campaigns as well is long and impressive.

Conclusion

I have discussed the pervading unrest in our nation and how it is expressed through citizen advocacy and environmental groups. I have also attempted to show that environmental problems demand complicated educational strategies and political acumen in dealing with them.

But perhaps educators must face a more pragmatic and critical question. The place of education in creating environmental quality is evident. But how do we health educators make the practice of community health education within environmental control programs a reality?

To begin to answer this question, we should look at the new institutions and organizations emerging to solve environmental problems. Of these organizations, those formed to solve regional problems on a regional scale hold promise. Because of this, community health educators should contact leaders of these organizations and encourage them to include educators as members of their teams. Such contacts can be made through the Society for Public Health Education, its chapters, or whatever other means are at hand. Educators have an essential role in developing appropriate educational components for regional programs relating not only to the delivery of health care, but also to the rescue of the environment. We cannot make a significant impact in these areas by maintaining subordinate positions in slots in small categorical programs.

At the same time, educators must adapt to extensive changes in the traditional institutional structures. We should acknowledge the drift of environmental control from the public health agencies. Educators who want to work on improving environmental quality may also have to drift away from working in more traditional health contexts. Or they may face the choice of deciding to work outside the health system in such environmentally related areas as promoting mass transportation.

Whatever options exist, educators will definitely have to exert their ingenuity to find their places. It will not be easy.

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