

Editorial

SANITARIAN

-A Title or a Profession?

Larry J. Gordon

Is the "Sanitarian" a professional? Of course not! The "Sanitarian" has little commonality of educational background or program scope.

Are there thousands of sanitarians who are professional? You bet! Sanitarians number among state health directors, state laboratory directors, professors, city managers, deans of schools of public health, directors of environmental health agencies, research scientists, and other professional environmental health workers. The career and professional heights to which an individual professional sanitarian may aspire are as great as the individual's capabilities and desires. It is interesting to note, however, that few of those individual "sanitarians" who have achieved recognized professional status continue to use the title "Sanitarian."

When I was first hired as a "Sanitarian," I was an activist if not an overly aggressive activist. I attempted to push and promote the status of the "sanitarian" at all levels of government, academia, and industry. I quickly learned that it was futile to push the entire group, but there was every opportunity for achievement and professional recognition for individual sanitarians. The title is unimportant and irrelevant.

But many sanitarians are their own worst enemies and continue to expect or demand professional recognition (like tilting a windmill) without striving for or even participating in enlarged roles, program areas, or pursuing broadened goals. Typically, many individual sanitarians expect professionalism based on a baccalaureate degree and narrow, traditional inspectional roles. The opportunities for achievement and professionalism are available, however.

It is still worth noting that many environmental health organizations have changed but little in the past 30 years in terms of organizational setting, mission and goals, program scope, and methodology. In many cases, necessary changes have occurred only at the prodding of some external force, rather than through internal

desires and actions. With rapid changes in the environment, public attitudes and expectations, the economy, technology, and problems of overpopulation, it is reasonable to assume that environmental health organizational patterns should periodically be re-evaluated -- much like marketing analysis for a product or concept that industry is attempting to promote.

Professional sanitarians continue to be needed in environmental health leadership positions in a multitude and variety of agencies involved in environmental health at all levels of government, industry, voluntary programs, research, and academia. The programmatic potential is as broad as the definition of environmental health. Opportunities for moving into executive roles in all types of health service careers are commonly available for those having the imagination, desire, and ability.

For many, the term "sanitarian" will continue to be only a narrowly defined job title. For the true professional, it offers the potential of a career as rewarding and challenging as the individual cares to make of it.

Much like "beauty," professionalism lies in the eyes of the beholder. There is no magic formula, nor can it be legislated, mandated, or commanded. Like loyalty and respect, professionalism must be earned.

Continuing the series of editorials by past presidents of the National Association of Sanitarians and National Environmental Health Association and winners of the Walter S. Mangold Award... Larry J. Gordon was co-recipient of the Mangold Award in 1961. He is deputy secretary of the New Mexico Department of Health and Environment and currently serving as president of the American Public Health Association. His address is P.O. Box 968. Santa Fe, NM 87513.