

## ▶ DIRECT FROM AAS



## The Ethics of Professionalism in Environmental Health



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**Editor's Note:** In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. The conclusions and opinions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

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Previously, I discussed the importance of a global outlook—including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—to meet the ethical obligations shared among environmental health professionals such as sanitarians, engineers, and community health nurses (Oerther, 2021). The constitution of the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS, 2006a) notes that the

purposes and objectives of AAS include, “promoting the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” But what is ethical conduct and what are the ethical obligations shared among environmental health professionals?

In Table 1, I provide the current code of ethics for professionals with a credential from

the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2022). The NEHA code identifies two areas of required action, namely: 1) keeping up-to-date on knowledge and 2) acting professionally. The code forbids behaviors that undermine the credential or impair the ability of a credentialed professional to discharge their duties. Further, the code promotes the credential through raising awareness within the public sphere. The NEHA code does not include details to define the meaning of professional manner (i.e., what to do) and it does not include examples of behaviors that undermine the credential (i.e., what not to do).

Terms such as professionalism simultaneously seem to be important and yet often are poorly understood by the very individuals who have an obligation to apply their meaning. One readily available, free resource that may be useful to environmental health professions trying to understand these terms is the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP, <https://iep.utm.edu>). Important, yet often confusing terms such as ethics, morals, principles, values, and virtues are carefully described in detailed articles in the IEP, written by and reviewed by a group of volunteers with earned doctorates in philosophy.

Alternatively, the meaning of professionalism for environmental health professionals may be gleaned from a comparative reading of the code of ethics from sister organizations of similar stature. For example, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH, 2022) maintains a code of ethics for members and fitness to practice rules. Section 4 of the CIEH code notes four main domains of ethics: 1) integrity, 2) competence, 3) respon-

TABLE 1

### Code of Ethics for Professionals Credentialed Through the National Environmental Health Association

#### Code of Conduct and Ethics

I shall endeavor to keep myself current and informed and satisfy any continuing education requirements that may be in effect for my credential.

I shall conduct myself in a professional manner befitting of my credentialed status.

I shall proudly represent my credentialed status to the public I serve.

I shall do nothing to undermine, detract from, or otherwise cause to develop any damaging associations with respect to this credential. I accept that any activity on my part that will cause this credential any measure of injury serves as a breach and a failure on my part to uphold this code of ethics. Moreover, I accept that such actions for which I might be responsible could result in the revocation of my credential.

I shall do nothing to impair my ability to discharge any administrative or regulatory duty related to my professional credential that may also be required under federal, state, or local law as a part of the position I hold.

Source: National Environmental Health Association, 2022.

TABLE 2

### Select Articles From the 2022 Update of the American Academy of Sanitarians Bylaws

Article	Description
2. Purpose and Objectives, Section 3, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	The Academy accepts [any] qualified member ... does not discriminate ... and strives to create an inclusive environment.
6. Committees, Section 3, Ad Hoc Committees	Ad hoc committees shall assist the Academy in creating, adopting, and implementing a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) policy that guides Academy employment, governance, and membership.
10. Code of Conduct	No officer or director shall: ... 3) publicly utilize any Academy affiliation in connection with the promotion of partisan politics, religious matters, or positions on any issues not in conformity with the official position or policies of the Academy ... 5) knowingly take any action or make any statements (written or oral) intended to influence the conduct of the Academy in such a way as to confer any financial benefit on any person, corporation, or entity in which the individual has an interest of affiliation.

Source: American Academy of Sanitarians, 2022.

sibility, and 4) respect. Section 5 of the CIEH codes provides examples of the behaviors CIEH expects of its members.

For example, integrity means that an environmental health professional holds the health and the protection of the public as their prime concern. With regard to integrity, the behaviors include: 1) providing prompt, clear, and accurate information; 2) seeking advice from colleagues when

unsure how to act in a particular situation; and 3) always placing the interests of the communities served above self-interest, the interest of colleagues, and the interest of any organization. In my personal opinion, I believe these examples of behaviors described by CIEH are entirely consistent with NEHA's expectation that I conduct myself in a professional manner. Furthermore, I believe these examples help to give

life to the CIEH code, which is not present in the NEHA code.

One domain where the CIEH code is particularly useful is the term respect. According to CIEH, respect includes recognizing the dignity of individuals, treating everyone fairly, and cooperating with others. Examples of respectful behaviors include: 1) ensuring an effective procedure exists to raise, investigate, and adjudicate complaints in the workplace; 2) assisting colleagues in complying with requirements for continuing professional development; and 3) recognizing differences among individuals and groups while avoiding stereotyping. I want to focus on this third example of respectful behavior.

In the July/August 2020 issue of the *Journal of Environmental Health*, Brian Collins, past president of NEHA and past chair of AAS, and Wendell Moore, past chair of AAS, described the formation of the AAS Respect, Integrity, Service, and Equality (RISE) Task Force (Collins & Moore, 2020). RISE was envisioned to ask, "Who are we? What do we look like? What do we represent? What are our perceptions and priorities versus our realities?" (Collins & Moore, 2020).

In June 2022, the bylaws of AAS were updated to incorporate the early efforts of RISE. In Table 2, I provide a selection from the updated bylaws. For more information, I encourage you to review the AAS website at [www.sanitarians.org](http://www.sanitarians.org).

The prior bylaws of AAS were adopted in 2006 and included a total of 7 pages of text (AAS, 2006b). The updated bylaws of AAS, adopted in 2022, include a total of 15 pages of text (AAS, 2022). Among the changes adopted in 2022, a statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion was added to the bylaws (a similar statement already exists in the AAS constitution). Furthermore, the updated bylaws call for the formation of an ad hoc committee to develop a policy on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In my personal opinion, a major improvement to the bylaws was the inclusion of a code of conduct.

Although the bylaws state that the AAS code of conduct applies to officers and directors, the list of seven behaviors helps to give life to our efforts to promote "the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health" (AAS, 2006a). For example, as described in Table 2, using an affiliation with

AAS to advance a political or religious cause could seem to fall outside of the requirement in the NEHA code to “conduct myself in a professional manner befitting of my credentialed status.”

I interpret the AAS code of conduct to mean that I should strongly consider removing my CEHS credential and my DAAS designation from my signature when authoring a newspaper editorial on a political or religious cause. And I am okay with striking that balance. AAS is not placing a limitation on my choice of free speech, rather the requirements of professional conduct limit me from potentially confusing the public by misrepresenting that AAS has an official position on a religious or political cause.

For environmental health professionals, one area where we need to be especially mindful in our ethical behavior is the polarization often observed in the public around the meaning of human-induced climate change. In my opinion, our ethical approach to this challenge needs to consider four items. First, we need to stick to the best available science while acknowledging the inherent skepticism that is part of any good application of the scientific method. Second, we need to avoid confusing the public by associating our profession with a particular political position or religious view. And third, we need to remember that the ethics of environmental health include caring for human welfare and planetary health from local to global (Oerther, 2022).

Fourth, and perhaps most important in my opinion, environmental health professionals need to help to create inclusive spaces for engagement where diverse views can be shared and true listening can occur. Past injustices have left a legacy of pain and disadvantage among many communities. These communities need to be heard and past injustices need to be addressed in the present so that the public can come together to tackle the shared challenges that face all of humanity. The resources of our shared planet are being stretched and the distribution of those resources among 8 billion humans is an opportunity for environmental health professionals to ensure the health and the protection of the public about whom we care deeply (Oerther et al., 2022). ❁

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