

POLICY FORUM

Public Health and Environmental Health

Introduction

The policy forum of this issue of the NCMJ draws from the papers and discussions of the 2010 Environmental Health Summit, held in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, last fall. The theme of that summit is the theme of this issue: bringing public health and environmental health together. Public health and environmental health have not always been so apart. The text of *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, from the Hippocratic Corpus, offered this advice to people who would seek to understand medicine:

Whoever wishes to investigate medicine properly, should proceed thus: in the first place to consider the seasons of the year... We must also consider the qualities of the waters, for as they differ from one another in taste and weight, so also do they differ much in their qualities. In the same manner, when one comes into a city to which he is a stranger, he ought to consider its situation, how it lies as to the winds and the rising of the sun... These things one ought to consider most attentively, and concerning the waters which the inhabitants use, whether they be marshy and soft, or hard, and running from elevated and rocky situations, and then if saltish and unfit for cooking; and the ground, whether it be naked and deficient in water, or wooded and well watered, and whether it lies in a hollow, confined situation, or is elevated and cold; and the mode in which the inhabitants live, and what are their pursuits, whether they are fond of drinking and eating to excess, and given to indolence, or are fond of exercise and labor, and not given to excess in eating and drinking.

This advice was and remains sound, but we have let our understanding of how and where we live, in the environmental sense, drift away from how we study, care for, and improve the health of people and populations. The environment in which we live is a strong determinant of how well we will live. We also have influence over that environment, and we ought to consider how we modify it in the sense of those who wish to “investigate medicine properly” for people and populations. In this issue, we see how we can better understand how what we do to live shapes where we live and, in turn, makes our lives better or worse.

The process of better understanding these connections has been improved by technologies such as geographic information systems and structured assessment methods. But there still remains a strong political element in the calculus of how we are to manage where and how we live. That calculus puts some people at greater risk because of the effects of our social and economic choices. Knowing that does not always mean that we can fix it. We still have to struggle to balance the needs of society with the demands that a healthy environment will bring.

Mankind can adapt to many “insults,” as René Dubos wrote, but that adaptation is not always passive. We must learn to shape how we live, as well as where we live, to make for a healthy planet and livable communities.

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