

IN OPERATORS WE TRUST

By Doug Buresh, Circuit Rider 3

Coming from a background in plumbing, long ago I became familiar with the old slogan, “The plumber protects the health of the nation.” Cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever and hepatitis A are just a few of the many unpleasant bacterial, viral, parasitic, and protozoal infections that plagued water supplies in the not-so-distant past. These are all waterborne diseases caused by microorganisms which live in water. Modern plumbing practices have helped to virtually eliminate these problems in the U.S. Sadly, these diseases still persist in other parts of the world where modern plumbing is lacking.

I’ve thought about changing this slogan by simply inserting operator for plumber. I will not do so, as I don’t wish to detract from the contributions plumbers have made to our health and welfare. (Nor do I wish to be accused of plagiarism, or, God forbid, get sued by anyone for it.) I would like to borrow on the concept, however.

Historically, water operators have also played a large role. The Center for Disease Control has recognized disinfection of public water supplies as one of the greatest achievements of public health in the 20th century. The majority of Americans gets at least a portion of their drinking water from surface waters, or water under its influence. Treatment and disinfection of that water is necessary to ensure its safety. Water operators run those treatment plants and maintain the distribution systems. For most of us in Nebraska, we are fortunate to have an abundance of fresh groundwater, and treatment and disinfection is not always needed. That is not to say we don’t have water quality issues. As operators, we deal with these issues all the time.

Think about it. Our customers depend on us as operators to provide them a constant supply of safe, clean drinking water. This should be our primary concern each and every day. Working in rural Nebraska, our jobs require many of us to wear a lot of different hats. Each day presents its own challenges. But the one which says water operator is probably the most important hat that we wear.

There is a good reason why we are required to have professional licenses from DHHS Division of Public Health to serve as operators. The public trust is in our hands. If we are not cautious, any number of nasty contaminants could be introduced into our water system. People might get sick, or even die, if it were to happen. Several cases of contaminations of public water supplies have occurred in the United States in recent years. As professionals, we need to be diligent, and do all we possibly can within our power, to ensure this does not happen in our systems.

Aside from the waterborne diseases which still lurk out there, we must deal with all the other possible contaminants to our water including: arsenic, nitrates, uranium, E coli and Total Coliforms, as well as, all the other organic and inorganic chemicals and disinfection by-products. Remember, we as professional operators truly are guardians and protectors of the public we serve. We do important work.

Any task requires us to have the right tools to complete the job properly. Water operators also need the right tools to properly do our jobs. As professionals we need to possess the knowledge, skills, training, and experience necessary for the safe and proper operation of our respective systems. I like to think of Nebraska Rural Water as another tool in the toolbox. We are here to help by providing training and technical assistance to the systems we serve. Don't hesitate to contact us.

The following is a related article written by Jennifer Wilson that appeared as a blog at www.smallwatersupply.org. It is titled: Are You Doing the Right Thing?

Last week I found an article on Twitter about a water operator who has surrendered his license. Why? He lied about his CEUs.

We read in the news almost every week about very serious transgressions of public servants, from the mayor lining his pockets to illegal wastewater discharges. Sadly, a couple of times each year we even find out that someone died from a public servant not doing his or her job.

We don't hear that often about the "little" things. That chemical feed reading that was a guesstimate. The training class where a participant took a long lunch. The form that was signed as the certified operator for another system he had not recently visited. You don't hear about these things until they turn into a not-so-little problem, or the individual gets caught.

Water operators like this one in Massachusetts give industry professionals who do the right thing, day in and day out, a bad name.

Sometimes we forget to talk publicly about the truly important responsibility for public health protection in the hands of water operators. As water colleagues we know this, but I would argue that we owe it to the communities we serve to remind them.

Do something in 2012 to connect the water from the tap to the real people who make it happen.

Host a tour of your plant or include a flyer in your next bill. These efforts will give the public a positive message about the importance of operators and the job they do. Through local outreach you can demonstrate that most operators are not like the one in Massachusetts.