

The Environmental Health Officers Association

In keeping with the wishes of our membership, expressed by the passing unanimously of a motion on a change of name at our annual general meeting in October 1975, we are pleased to announce that our association is now legally titled 'The Environmental Health Officers Association'.

This change of name has been effected in anticipation of a change of title for the office of health inspector to that of Environmental Health Officer. It is in accord with the thinking of the Department of Health.

The basic functions of an Environmental Health Officer have been proposed as including the following (Euro Reports and Studies 29):

- (1) Improving human health and protecting it from environment hazards;
- (2) Enforcing environmental legislation;
- (3) Developing liaison between the inhabitants and the local authority and between the local and higher levels of administration;
- (4) Acting independently to provide advice on environmental matters;
- (5) Initiating and implementing health education programmes to promote an understanding of environmental principles.

These last three elements, together with a host of other related activities, have characterised in large part the work role of our membership from the time when our association was first incorporated some twenty-eight years ago.

Unfortunately the title 'Health Inspector' belies the role designated and is associated in the minds of the public virtually exclusively with activities directed at surveillance, enforcement and prosecution.

The title 'Environmental Health Officer' is an apt one and recognises the professional role already operating in the service. While enforcement and prosecution activities are legitimately pursued, functions carried out daily around the country bring a whole host of tasks to mind which characterise the office in a much more complete way. Planning, co-ordinating, promoting, liaising, instructing, guiding, educating, motivating, researching, pacifying, satisfying, assisting, resolving, averting and abating are words used to describe tasks performed in environmental health by our membership. The great variety of environmental health problems and challenges encountered require responses of many kinds and demand a high level of knowledge, expertise, and tact to ensure that optimal solutions are adopted.

A change of title should not be seen as merely a cosmetic exercise. It recognises a commitment, a philosophy, and an identifiable realm of responsibility, additionally it identifies an officer whose approach is comprehensive and not fragmented; an officer whose training and experience fit him for the role of 'general practitioner' in serving the community's environmental health needs,

particularly in the fields of technical advice, education and environmental health legislation and enforcement.

While it is possible that some problems relating to the protection of the health of the population from environmental hazards and the protection of the environment may be dealt with by the specialist, most of the problems necessitate a broader approach than the more narrow sectional solution by the specialist in environmental health. Ortega & Gasset in "The Revolt of the Masses" highlighted the need for a quality of judgement and action which is founded on a comprehensive broad base of knowledge and learning when characterising the specialist as 'one who, out of all that has to be known in order to be a man of judgement, is only acquainted with one science, and even of that one only knows the small corner in which he is an active investigator. He even proclaims it as a virtue that he takes no cognizance of what lies outside the narrow territory specially cultivated by himself, and gives the name of 'dilettantism' to any curiosity for the general scheme of knowledge.

Previously men could be divided simply into the learned and the ignorant, those more or less the one and those more or less the other. But your specialist cannot be brought in under either of these two categories. He is not learned, for he is formally ignorant of all that does not enter into his specialty; but neither is he ignorant, because he is a "scientist" and "knows" very well his own tiny portion of the universe. We shall have to say that he is a learned ignoramus, which is a very serious matter, as it implies that he is a person who is ignorant, not in the fashion of the ignorant man, but all the petulance of one who is learned in his own special line.'

The specialist, however, whose educational foundation is both comprehensive and broad; or the generalist who understands the methodology applicable to the different specialties, is one well equipped to be a man of judgement. Our Association rejoices in its new name and we trust that our organisation in its Environmental Health Officers will serve to meet the changing environmental health challenges which will face us up to and into the twenty first century