

Inside

the life of a

Health Hazard Inspector

As a health hazard inspector, Carl had encountered some strange and challenging issues. Yesterday, for example, he'd had a phone call from a woman who had been near a mercury spill in a medical building, and who was concerned about the implications of that. As she described the situation, Carl's internal alarm bells started ringing, so he dropped what he was doing and headed straight over.

When Carl arrived, the cleaners from the building were there with an industrial vacuum, trying to suck the mercury up. Carl immediately donned his mask, had the machine turned off, and assessed the situation. There was no question in his mind that the cleaners had unwittingly introduced mercury to the air in the office with their machine. Worse than that, though, they had been operating near the cold air return in the office, so the mercury was now



being spread through every room in the building by the ventilation system. Weighing safety concerns against inconvenience, Carl consulted with the medical officer of health and issued an order to have the building evacuated until it could be assessed as safe.

That was yesterday, and this was today. Carl was sorting through emails when a call came through from a woman

concerned about a soccer field. Her son played in a soccer league, and when they had arrived at it last night, it was clear that it had been home to Canada geese during the day. Goose excrement was everywhere. Was the field safe to play on?

Carl assured the woman that he would look into it and get back to her. As he sat and thought about it, he appreciated the mother's



concern: kids don't just run around on the grass in a soccer game – they fall on it and slide on it. And there could be no guarantees that some of the geese weren't sick, in which case the feces could be more hazardous. Carl did some research and didn't find evidence of any extraordinary risks. He called the woman back, said she was right to be concerned, but assured her that with some simple precautions – such as washing hands after the game, and maybe rinsing the cleats when she got home – the field would be fine to play on.

After Carl had checked his emails, he headed out the door. He had three public swimming pools to inspect this morning. The testing was fairly simple: he checked for clarity with a six-inch disc, as well as for PH levels, chlorine and alkalinity. But as he went through the tests, he often thought about the kids from the neighbourhood coming down to the pool; it was a routine job, but a critically important one.

That was something Carl liked about his job: a little bit of routine – inspecting day-cares or pools – and a whole lot of calls that presented new and occasionally urgent challenges. As a health hazard inspector, Carl dealt with just about every risk outside of food preparation. Some calls required immediate attention (dog bites or bat bites could bring rabies, which is fatal); some required a police presence (responding to a complaint about a known crack house); some required the tact of a social worker (a complaint about mice or roaches caused by the hoarding of a reclusive

neighbour); some calls might have nothing to do with public safety (a private home owner complaining about ants); and some calls might have hidden agendas.

Whatever the call, Carl's job was to assess the empirical evidence, determine if there was a health risk and, if so, find the resources to intervene and create a change for the better. Such an intervention might go well beyond the strict issue of safety – it might draw on the skills of an engineer, educator, lawyer, nurse, social worker or psychologist. All in a day's work.

After his pool inspections, Carl inspected a mold complaint from a tenant, most likely caused by a leaky pipe, and then on his way back to the office went to pay a visit to a family he had come to know while inspecting a landlord's complaint. When he had first visited the family it was clear that the landlord was looking for an excuse to evict them, and it was also clear why. They were a family under duress, from within and without. The apartment was filthy and it was also overcrowded – not just with the parents and kids, but with two cats and two dogs as well. There was evidence of alcoholism, poverty and an inability to care for the kids. But as Carl talked to them, he could also tell that the family was isolated, and unaware that support was available.

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Carl had linked the family to services that offered assistance and counsel. Before long they had surrendered the animals, got help from Children's Aid, and just last week had moved into a larger apartment. Carl had promised to visit them this afternoon. When they welcomed him in, it was clear that they had made themselves a new home. Things were still going to be a bit of a struggle – but the family was no longer struggling alone, and Carl could tell from their faces that they were all moving towards a brighter future.

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