

You are the Public in Public Health

Dena Loijos submitted this op-ed on behalf of the Community Health Education department of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency. The mission of the department is to provide education and build community capacity for chronic disease and injury prevention.

National Public Health Week is April 6-12 and the Santa Cruz County Health Service Agency is inviting the public to take part in a county-wide celebration. “Me?” you may be thinking. “What does public health have to do with me?” In fact, every day, you are the public in public health.

You wake to the sound of garbage trucks rumbling down your street – just one of the many sanitation services you owe to public health. Your kids roll out of bed without smallpox, polio, or any of the other childhood diseases for which we have safe, effective vaccines. Your breakfast cereal has a clear and accurate food label, your milk is pasteurized, and your eggs are salmonella-free. You hop in the car and automatically buckle your seatbelt, the result of a successful public health campaign that saves more than 13,000 lives each year. You spend your day in a smoke-free work place and grab lunch at a restaurant that is inspected by environmental health experts. After work, you take your children to a neighborhood park to exercise, play and enjoy the fresh air.

You are the public in public health every time you slather on sunscreen, strap on a bicycle helmet, wash your hands, or cover your cough. “No,” you may be thinking. “Those are personal choices that I make.” You’re absolutely right. But those choices are informed by public health research, education, advocacy and outreach, as well as local, state and national public health policies. Because when it comes to public health it’s what we do *collectively* that assures a healthy community. The goal is to maximize the benefits and minimize harm not only to an individual but throughout an entire population.

This isn’t always an easy balance, as we’ve seen recently with the Ebola crisis, national measles outbreak and, closer to home, the needle exchange program. In each case, there’s a tension between personal choices and collective responsibility. When public health crises emerge, experienced professionals must go through a careful process to evaluate the level of risk, demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed response, and assess the economic and social costs of action versus inaction.

In the Ebola crisis, exposed individuals are asked to give up their personal freedom, through either isolation or quarantine, in order to stop the spread of the disease. With the measles outbreak, parents are asked to overcome resistance to the vaccine in order to protect more vulnerable children who can’t be vaccinated. In the case of syringe services, Santa Cruz residents are asked to balance their concerns about the impact of injection drug users in our midst with the collective good of reducing the overall number of needles in the community as well as reducing the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne illnesses.

When this balance is successfully achieved, public health programs provide a tangible return on your investment. Regardless of age, race, gender or socio-economic status, public health initiatives positively impact your daily quality of life. In fact, public health programs have become so ingrained in our society that they are often taken for granted.

So help us recognize and celebrate the many public health successes of the past and present during National Public Health Week (NPHW). Watch for NPHW posters at local stores, restaurants, schools and

clinics. Attend a NPHW open house or farmers' market event. Make a pledge. Sign a petition. To learn more, visit www.SantaCruzHealth.org/NPHW where you'll find a full calendar of events. You can also visit us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/PublicHealthSCC) or join us on Twitter (www.Twitter.com/PublicHealthSCC).

You are the public in public health. With your support we can continue to make Santa Cruz County a healthy, safe and vibrant community for everyone.