OUR READINESS AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROFESSIONAL STATUS

EMIL T. CHANLETT
School of Public Health
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

The distinguishing characteristics of a profession is the ability to solve problems involving the public interest by application of unique skills. This statement points to three factors of importance and concern, public interest, problem solving ability, and unique skills.

Brief thought of the characteristics of established professional groups clarifies their position in our society. Those of medicine, dentistry and nursing owe their place to the very personal manipulation of our bodies and function in what are literally life and death decisions. Architecture and engineering are at least once removed from that close relation. But, there are matters involving public and personal safety. Law presents a different relation. It is an issue of trust and confidence in the delicate unravelling of personal relations which have become twisted and knotted either between individuals or between an individual and society. All engage in relatively complex matters which pose problems requiring an intellectual mastery of a body of fundamental knowledge, and its application to living entities.

What is our state of readiness in these matters? Have we established the concept of a trust in the public mind? Have we defined the uniqueness of our skills? Do we go about our tasks armed with a problem solving attitude?

What answers can we bring to these questions? The three are strongly inter-related. In full candor we will have to say “essentially negative.” We can cite many splendid examples and achievements which point the way to strong affirmatives.

The people we serve, those who benefit from our daily work and with whom we deal through direct service, would upon reflection grant that in many instances their health is in our hands. Furthermore, in just as many cases, so are their pocketbooks. But this would be only upon reflection. This bespeaks a lack of consciousness of the sanitarian’s contribution to the community’s health. We must seek devices to sharpen public awareness of the sanitarian’s professional contributions.

Within our own circles we have not made sufficiently clear our claims to unique skills. Time and again one hears the words, “Just what is a sanitarian? Some-
the stimulus, the goals, and the opportunities for
growth in "on-the-job" effectiveness. From an organi-
zation there comes forth a priceless product - leader-
ship. The good work and the high aspiration of the
emergent leaders become the pattern and the identity
of the group.

People who have sought to define an educational
path to professional status for sanitarians have faced
the fact that there is no single entrance clearly marked.
The nature of this difference becomes more marked
when one considers the accepted traditional educa-
tional patterns leading to the profession of law, medi-
cine, nursing, engineering, veterinary medicine, and
dentistry. The criteria which may be found in job
descriptions, civil service classifications, qualification
statements from our national organizations, and
statements in the rules governing registration boards,
have shown distinct advancement during the last
decade. These have now essentially come to the point
of requiring graduation from college with a defined
number of courses in the basic natural sciences.
Compared to other professional groups, these require-
ments are scant. But more significant is the lack of a
cohesive discipline molding to some common pattern
the mastery and exercise of a body of scientific know-
ledge (1).

In spite of this evident lack, no satisfactory alternate
is at hand. Some point to the possibility of the de-
velopment of sanitary science education at the under-
graduate level embodied in such degree titles as
Bachelor of Science in Sanitation or Bachelor of San-
tary Science. Others would move forward to the
master's level, reserving the professional status as
sanitarian to those who have completed a year of
graduate work. The numbers who have emerged from
such educational experience are few compared to
the total sanitation personnel with our state and local
health organizations, and with private industry and
the armed forces. Although at the moment it may seem
that such notions are scarcely worth consideration,
their mere existence requires that those of us
concerned with the professional status of sanitarians
give them thoughtful study and that we be prepared
to enter into discussions of them well informed.

Educational criteria do not stop with the definition
of formal education. Clearly, experience and know-
ledge acquired by self-study can contribute enormously
to a man's capacity. While embracing this concept
wholeheartedly, it should also be recognized that
experience becomes more meaningful when it occurs
upon a foundation of understanding of the scientific
principles which are governing the phenomena under
observation. A word must also be spoken concerning
a qualifying examination. Indeed, it can be a fair
measure of one's possession of technical content, and
by ingenious questioning, reveal the capacity to bring
such knowledge to bear on particular problems.
Furthermore, an examination compels a beforehand
preparation and study. Nevertheless, it alone cannot
be a full measure of the sanitarian's ability which
depends so heavily on his capacities to establish
personal relations, through which he brings about a
change in the behavior of the persons with whom he
is working. In spite of the lack of uniform devices
for measuring such abilities, they must be given full
weight in an estimate of a man's professional stature.

Organizations are the means through which pro-
fessions gain strength and cohesion. Policies and
standards creating and governing professions are
forged in hard committee sessions where diverse view-
points are harmonized, and if need be, compromised.
These become the point of referral as external rela-
tions require a definition of the body and soul of
the profession.

This points directly to the most important role of
professional organizations in public relations. This is
the task of interpreting the function of the profession.
The organization's activities and statements become
the embodiment of the ideals of the group. These
form the face by which the people recognize the
profession.

For sanitarians, who are in the main governmental
employees, organization has the further value of pre-
senting to the governmental hierarchy our needs, our
gripes, and our successes. The individual is at con-
siderable disadvantage in attempting to carry his own
case and cause to the higher authorities. Through an
organization, matters of status and interest may be
brought before the higher echelons with grace and digi-
nity, and without the stigma of insubordination and the
risk of punitive actions by resentful superiors. For
sanitarians, this is all the more needful when one con-
siders the path which must be threaded through a
maze of elected and appointed officials, physicians,
engineers, and veterinarians with whom the lines of
communication and relationship are not always clear,
and at times quite unsatisfactory.

This group is well under way toward these goals of
education and organization. You are the ones who
have chosen to spearhead the unfinished work ahead.
The needs of our sanitary organization are twofold.
One is that of individual participation, which means
paying dues, serving willingly upon committees, read-
ing the journals and publications of the organization,
attending its meetings, and particularly, that of giving
careful thought to the election of the officers of the
organization. Our second need concerns the over-all
relationships of our national organizations. It is that
of seeking and being prepared to move toward uni-
fication. In this matter there are hopeful signs that our
two major sanitarian associations in the country may join forces. In this, we rest our trust in the thought that in union there is strength.

A profession is created by its practitioners (2). Organizational devices, certainly, are helpful and absolutely necessary. But these can be no better than its leadership and its membership. Laws and regulations, registration boards, and certification plans will not of themselves create a profession. Indeed, if such action is taken without great care and preparation, the results may be an ill-conceived plan which may kill the opportunity for the creation of a true professional status.

The business of the creation of professional status is a task which belongs to each and every one of us who would cherish the title, sanitarian, holding it in the high esteem in which it was born at the turn of the 20th century. Then it was claimed by engineers, physicians, and scientists alike who had banded together to lay the foundations for the scientific study of the hygiene of our environment. The execution of this task by each of us may be defined simply. It is required that you advance your knowledge; that you seize every opportunity to master the science which is behind the rules and regulations; that you fix your judgment by the most scientific objective analysis of which you are capable; that you go about your daily responsibilities governed by the highest ideals of personal integrity; that you follow the Golden Rule in your relations with others; that you give selfless participation in sanitarian organizations and associations; and that you contribute to the development of sanitation practices to make these unique by means of ingenious thought or by dogged efforts as your endowments permit. These, and no less, are our responsibilities. Achievement of these will be a measure of our readiness. When ever a relatively small number of us are able to meet these challenges, we will find our colleagues in public health, and the people whom we serve most ready to recognize our professional worth.

REFERENCES