

The History of the Registration of California's Environmental Health Specialists

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In an editorial published in the September-October 1945 issue of *The Sanitarian*, Roscoe Davis, Sanitary Inspector with the California State Department of Public Health, proclaimed that June 15, 1945 was a "RED LETTER DAY" for Sanitarians in California.¹ For at 3:00 p.m. on that date Governor Earl Warren signed into law Senate Bill 319 which provided for the registration of existing sanitarians and the future examination and registration of sanitarians employed full time in State and local departments of health of the State of California. During the bill signing Governor Warren stated that he was proud to sign such progressive legislation for public health.²

The enactment of this legislation provided examination and registration of sanitarians in California and culminated a struggle of 16 years to gain such recognition for the profession. Legislation to create a registration act in California for sanitarians had been introduced in 1931, 1933 and again in 1935, but none successfully negotiated the legislative process. One of the earliest activities undertaken by the California Association of Sanitarians after its formation in 1930 was to draft two legislative bills to create a registration program. These bills were the ones introduced in 1931. They passed the Senate but failed to gain passage in the Assembly.³ The interest in securing a registration act in California was not diminished when the National Association of Sanitarians replaced the California Association of Sanitarians in 1937. Much of the program at the annual convention of the National Association of Sanitarians held in San Francisco in 1943 was dedicated to the establishment of standards for sanitarians. The Northern California Section of the organization had the task the following year of drafting a bill for registering sanitarians to be presented to the State Legislature. Melvin J. Olsen, a sanitarian with the Sacramento County Health Department, was elected as Chairman of the Committee on Registration and drafted the proposed legislation.⁴

The legislation that was adopted in 1945 for examining and registering of sanitarians defined a sanitarian as a person trained in the field of sanitary science and technology who is qualified to carry out educational and inspectional duties and enforce the law in the field of sanitation. The original registration law required the then State Department of Public Health to accept for registration any person who prior to January 1, 1946, the effective date of the registration statute, had been employed as a sanitarian, food and market inspector, sanitary inspector or housing inspector by the State, city, county or local health district of the State or any person who had passed an official civil service examination in

any of these classifications by the State, city, county or local health district of the State. This provided a mechanism for those who were currently employed or on a civil service list for these job classifications to become registered. After the effective date of the registration law, the State department was directed to administer examinations in various parts of the state to qualify persons as registered sanitarians who would become employed on a full time basis in health departments of the State or local jurisdictions to enforce State statutes relative to public health, the rules and regulations of the State Board of Public Health and local public health ordinances.⁵

Thomas McMorrow of the Contra Costa County Health Department was issued the first sanitarian registration certificate. He was very proud of being R.S. Number 1. He confided to the author that he had achieved the status of being the first person registered by volunteering his wife to type the registration certificates, and in doing so he had her type his as the first one. However, a review of archived materials from the earliest days of the registration program found a letter from Mr. McMorrow dated August 18, 1945 to Mr. C. G. Gillespie, Chief of the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering for the State Department of Public Health, providing verification of his test results for a sanitary inspector that would qualify him for registration. In the letter, Mr. McMorrow stated: "I do hope that my prompt submission of this card will place me in that enviable position of being No. 1 man on the registration list."⁶ Mr. McMorrow served as the Director of Sanitation for Contra Costa County and often delighted in asking new sanitarians interviewing for positions with the county if they knew their registration number. When they proudly told him their number, he would respond by saying that he still knew his number, and then he would show them his registration certificate with Number 1 on it.

In a paper presented October 13, 1945 at the ninth Annual Conference of the National Association of Sanitarians held in El Centro, California Charles L. Senn, Director of Sanitation with the Los Angeles City Health Department, spoke about the positive feeling that was in the air at the conference. The reasons for this positive spirit among the attendees were several fold. First, World War II had ended and relatives, friends and co-workers were returning from battle. Second, the feeling now was that improvements in sanitation would be able to be accomplished in the everyday work performed by sanitarians. For too long the excuse that "there was a war on" had been used to hamper corrections and improvements in sanitation, construction and housing. There now seemed to be optimism that sanitarians would be able to achieve accomplishments in their field of work. A more important reason for celebrating, he commented, was the passage of the Sanitarian Registration Act.⁷

Some health officers at the time thought that the work of nurses was more important than the work of sanitarians. This, Mr. Senn analyzed, was due to the fact that sanitarians were too focused on writing notices to bring about compliance with the law, and the health officers were receiving complaints

regarding such actions. Nurses, on the other hand, took an educational approach in implementing their programs and spent time informing civic organizations about their accomplishments. His presentation went on to stress the need for training for sanitarians so that they could change from being sanitary inspectors focused strictly on code enforcement to becoming educators. He called for local training of new staff to instill in them a spirit of public health so that they could do a good job. He also recognized that all practicing sanitarians should keep abreast of modern developments through in-service training and university courses. He hoped that the registered sanitarians would be as proud of their registration as were the other public health professionals.⁸

The California Department of Public Health issued registration certificate number 1000 on June 13, 1947 to Desmond W. Coffelt. Mr. Coffelt was a Lieutenant (j.g.), Hospital Corps in the United States Navy at the time he received his registration.⁹ Nearly 20 years later registration certificate number 3000 was issued to Robert L. Cushing on January 27, 1967 who still works for the City of San Jose. It took nearly 25 more years for the number of registrations to double when on December 1, 1991 registration certificate number 6000 was issued to Erick M. Mirabella. The California Department of Health Services has just recently issued registered environmental health specialist certificate number 7000 to Peter Z. Keshishian in January 2001.

A dozen years after California had passed the first Sanitarian Registration Act, only five other states had passed similar statutes. By that time California had registered 1850 sanitarians from the 2100 applications for registration it had received. During the period from 1951 to 1957, approximately 85 percent of the sanitarians registered in California had college degrees. This fact prompted the State Board of Public Health to initiate a change in the education requirements to include a bachelor's degree for sanitarian registration. The elevation of educational standards was perceived as placing the burden of preparation on the applicant and relieving governmental units from training expenses.¹⁰

An important improvement to the registration act was made through legislation in 1983 that regulated the practice of sanitarians in both the public and private sectors and defined the scope of practice for the profession.¹¹ The legislation also allowed the Department to deny, suspend, refuse to renew or revoke a sanitarian registration certificate for acts of deceit, misrepresentation, violation of contract, fraud, negligence, professional incompetence or unethical practice.¹² Using this power, the Department has taken disciplinary actions that have resulted in the revocation of registration certificates. To be recognized as a legitimate profession there must be a mechanism for enacting disciplinary action. Amending the registration act helped to secure this status.

The Sanitarian Registration Act was amended again during the 1986 legislative session to create a new classification category for retired sanitarians and a reduced biennial fee for them of \$25.00. This legislation became effective on

January 1, 1987. It allowed retired sanitarians not working in a job requiring registration who were at least 50 years old or collecting retirement benefits and had worked as Registered Sanitarians for at least 10 years in California, or received an on-the-job disability before the 10 year period of time had elapsed, to renew their registration in this classification.¹³

The Department's Office of Legal Services reviewed the regulations governing education requirements for the Sanitarian Registration Act and issued an opinion stating that a bachelor's degree and all education requirements had to be completed before a person could be employed as a sanitarian trainee. The opinion further stated that only work experience completed after a person met all the education requirements would be acceptable in determining eligibility to take the registration examination. It was felt that these requirements were too restrictive. The Sanitarian Registration Certification Committee held two workshops, one in Los Angeles and the other in Hayward, to receive input on this and other concerns related to the Sanitarian Registration Act. Comments received during the workshops led to new legislation that would allow experience gained prior to completing all education requirements to count towards fulfilling requirements for the examination and upgrading the registration examination.¹⁴

Comments received during the workshops also led to a name change. The terms "sanitarian" and "registered sanitarian" were changed to "registered environmental health specialist" through legislation carried by Assemblyman Trice Harvey in 1988.¹⁵ This was done with the support of the California Environmental Health Association to more correctly reflect the changing nature of the profession from sanitation to encompassing the total field of environmental health. Too often the public had viewed the term sanitarian with sanitation or janitorial worker and the name change was seen as a positive image enhancement. The change in the name to environmental health specialist was consistent with the similar change in the professional organization from California Association of Sanitarians to California Environmental Health Association that had occurred in 1970.

It is interesting to note that Assemblyman Harvey was a registered sanitarian (registration number 2346) and had worked for the Kern County Health Department. He enthusiastically supported the change of name to registered environmental health specialist. Following passage of this legislation, new certificates of registration as environmental health specialists were sent to all former registered sanitarians. The author recalls visiting Assemblyman Harvey's office at the Capitol on several occasions and observed his registration certificate displayed on the wall for all of his constituents and visitors to see.

The provisions for investigating complaints made against registered environmental health specialists has also provided an additional benefit to those found innocent of the charges brought against them. In several cases the fact that the Department conducted a thorough investigation into the allegations

made against the registered environmental health specialist and found the charges to be unfounded, saved the expense of the environmental health specialist fighting a lawsuit.

Since its inception in 1946, the registration program has issued over 7000 certificates of registration. There are currently 3465 active environmental health specialists registered in California. Many of the early registrants have passed away or have retired and let their registration lapse. The earliest registered person currently on file is Edwin S. Doyle who holds registration number 17. Mr. Doyle was born in December 1913 and is retired from the National Cannery Association. The next earliest registration belongs to Mr. Olsen who holds registration number 508. Mr. Olsen was born in June 1912 and, as mentioned earlier in this paper, played a critical role in getting the original registration act adopted.

The registration program is in the process of developing a new strategic plan. As part of this planning process, a questionnaire was sent to all active registered environmental health specialists on November 6, 2000. A response rate of approximately 30 percent was achieved, and the information obtained from the questionnaire is being tabulated and will be utilized in developing the multi-year strategic plan for shaping the future of the program. A request was also made to the California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health and the California Environmental Health Association to have the officers complete a consensus questionnaire to provide input from each of their organizations. A preliminary review of the responses indicates that some of the issues and concerns that have been noted in this historical review of the program continue to this day. The new strategic plan will need to deal with these issues as the profession moves into the 21st Century.

¹ Davis, Roscoe C., R.S., "Editorial, California Sanitarians Arrive!" *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 8, September-October, 1945, p. 60.

² Olsen, Melvin J., R.S., "Registered Sanitarians' Bill Passed By California Legislature," *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 8, July-August, 1945, p. 15.

³ Mangold, Walter S., R.S., "Coming of Age," *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 20, September-October, 1957, p.70.

⁴ Olsen, "Registered Sanitarians' Bill Passed By California Legislature," *loc. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵ Olsen, *loc. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

⁶ McMorrow, Thomas M. letter to Bureau of Sanitary Engineering, State Department of Public Health requesting registration as a sanitarian, August 18, 1945.

⁷ Senn, Charles L., "Value Of Registration Of Sanitarians To Public Health And The National Welfare," *The Sanitarian*, Vol.8, January-February, 1946, p. 157.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp.157-162.

⁹ Sampson, W. W., "The Thousandth Registered Sanitarian," *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 10, January-February, 1948, p.167.

¹⁰ Mangold, Walter S., R.S., "Coming of Age," *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 20, September-October, 1957, p.73.

¹¹ Lassiter, Marcia and Eastman, Diane, "Proposed Sanitarian Registration Act," memorandum sent to all California Registered Sanitarians, February 18, 1983.

¹² California Health and Safety Code, Section 106715, Chapter 1271, Statutes of 1983, amended by Chapter 415 (reorganization of Health and Safety Code), Statutes of 1995.

¹³ California Health and Safety Code, Sections 106695 and 106700, created by Chapter 340, Statutes of 1986, amended by Chapter 415, Statutes of 1995.

¹⁴ McGurk, Jack S., R.S., Turner, Douglas E., R.S., and Winston, Martin, R.S., "Sanitarian Registration Program Update," memorandum sent to all California Registered Sanitarians, May 27, 1987.

¹⁵ California Health and Safety Code, Section 106600, Chapter 773, Statutes of 1988, amended by Chapter 415, Statutes of 1995.