

Tuesday, April 14, 2020

STATEMENT to the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors:

I am going to tell you what I will do and not do, in my role as the Deputy Public Health Officer, to continue to assist the people of our County in addressing the dire, long term situation facing all of us—in our county, our state, and country, and in almost every country on earth.

We may seem to be less vulnerable than the counties around us at the moment because we are doing so well by the numbers; as you know, the situation changes daily, and our surge will come if we let our guard down. The fact that we are doing so well is extraordinary when we compare ourselves with our neighboring rural counties. That success is due in part to Dr. Doohan's leadership, to the role of the EOC, and to the fact that most of our citizens have taken her advice to heart.

I came out of retirement to help her, a friend and colleague, overwhelmed by the work of being our only Public Health Officer, and to help our community. On a practical level, I am well aware every day that I am the oldest person in the EOC, and I don't have the stamina that I used to have.

Being a physician does not make me a public health expert, and public health expertise is needed to be a Public Health Officer, especially in a pandemic. Most physicians, myself included, are not public health experts, because it requires a unique education that is different than medical education. I am not a public health expert.

Isn't it ironic that Dr. Doohan is both the Public Health Officer for Mendocino County and in the last semester of her two year program in Masters in Public Health, which is a required degree for position of Public Health Officer? Her required thesis title could be "Pandemic Management, A Trial by Fire." I have joked with her that she should take all her notes, the minutes of meetings, and the Public Health Orders, Advisories and Alerts she has carefully written, bundle them up, and sent them to her advisor, and say "Here's my thesis."

I don't envy the position she is in; I see how challenging it is, and I don't want her job. I did not become the Deputy Health Officer to fill Dr. Doohan's shoes when she leaves in June for her new job. Hopefully, it will be a person who likes to work in a rural, under-resourced county, who has an extensive knowledge of public health, and the experience to match it. All of these qualities are needed to take over pandemic management when she completes her time here; I have a minute fraction of the knowledge and 4 weeks of experience. Mendocino County should continue to aggressively recruit for the vacant position of Public Health Officer; the County should be advertising in all major Public Health journals and using professional recruiters to find a qualified candidate. I want to review the existing search process with Human Resources.

Here's what I can do: I will be the short term bridge for that new hire, assuming I can keep up the pace. I will evaluate and re-evaluate my ability to continue to do so on a weekly basis, as I have for the last four weeks. My operating principle so far has been to "give it another week;" I

have slowly understood more and become more efficient at managing that enormous amount of information that goes into understanding the situation and associated decision making.

In order for me to be the bridge in the future, I will require an expert Public Health consultant to assist me, and my public decision-making will be informed by that expert as well by the our regional County Public Health Officers. It should be realized today that my public health decision-making will be in locked step with county public health colleagues to our South, because they know what they are doing, and I know comparatively little. The value of Sheltering-in-Place, social distancing and restriction of all non-essential activities, and the value of regional Public Health decision-making has been demonstrated in our own County and State. I will not be pressured by anyone without the knowledge, experience or authority to make such decisions.

If what I have outlined is acceptable, then I need more time to follow and understand the daily discussions and the decision-making that Dr. Doohan is involved in, moment-to-moment and day-to-day. This is not an easy job, and she has been doing her best at it, whether from here or from San Diego. For the good of the community, I will continue to work for Mendocino County under the conditions outlined above. I am a physician, not the public health expert which all of us need for the health of the citizens of our County.

If you do not find what I can do as acceptable, then today is my last day of work.

Submitted by James Flaherty, MD