An American's Perspective

Ein Plädoyer für Strahlenschutz als gesellschaftlich wichtige Aufgabe

Wie der Strahlenschutz zu Andy Karams Arbeitsfeld wurde, ähnelt wohl so manchem Berufsweg der FS-Mitglieder. Sein Text ist aus seiner Erfahrung in den USA geprägt, könnte aber auch ein Anstoß für uns sein, „den Strahlenschutz" bekannter zu machen. Sein Fazit jedenfalls „Unser Beruf ist notwendig, und es ist schade, dass so wenige Menschen überhaupt von unserer Existenz wissen, geschweige denn den Wert schätzen, den wir schaffen. Aber das muss nicht so sein." beschreibt auch unsere Situation.

Schriftleitung

A well-kept secret

My dream jobs

When I was a kid I knew exactly what I was going to be when I grew up – a football (American, of course) player. Then I was going to be an engineer (the guys who drove the trains) and then … I can't remember … and then a doctor (a lot of relatives were in medicine or dentistry), and then an engineer (the technical one) … and then I joined the Navy. I never even considered a career in RP – mostly because I'd never heard of it. It's hard to dream of being a professional in a field you don't know exists and that you know nothing about. It wasn't until I joined the Navy at age 20 that I even knew RP was a career option – and even then I didn't pursue it until I'd been out of the Navy for a year and didn't think of it as my career until I was in my mid-30s.

My late conversion to radiation protection

In spite of my late conversion to radiation protection I continued to study Geology and Environmental Science (mostly because there was no RP degree program at my university), and even today I have not had a formal education in the field. That's the main reason I pursued certification, earning my CHP (Certification in Health Physics) when I was in my mid-30s; I felt that, without the certification there was no objective evidence that would support my claim to be a radiation protection professional. That was in 1995; in the intervening 30 years I've discovered the depth, richness, and satisfaction that the profession can provide, but I certainly had no idea at first.

Initiative for a degree program in radiation protection

I was in academia for a while, one of my goals being to start up a degree program in radiation protection. A nice grant helped jump-start this process and a year later I'd developed the necessary courses, purchased the first batch of equipment I'd need for the first- and second-year lab classes. My thinking was to work with the other science chairs to offer RP as a second degree, piggybacking on the fact that the prerequisites for my courses had considerable overlap with those for a physics, engineering, chemistry, or biology degree. I rounded up some interested students, taught the first year's classes…and my Chair cancelled the program, refusing to schedule any further classes. Turns out he didn't care about adding a degree program – he just wanted his share of my grant. I lost my funding and left academia, changing my focus to issues related to radiological and nuclear emergency prevention and response, which is where I continue to reside professionally.

The reason for going into so much detail is to make a few points:

- It's very likely that no kids are dreaming of working in radiation protection when they grow up and, unless they have a way to learn of our existence, they're not likely to.
- Starting up a new degree program isn't easy, even if your Chair is an eager participant. And even then, a duplicitous Chair or Dean can hang you out to dry as soon as they've stripped all the money they can.
- But RP is such a broad field with such wide-ranging areas of knowledge that it's relatively easy to apply virtually any scientific or technical education or training to starting a career in the field.

So what does that mean to us, as RP professionals who are (presumably) interested in maintaining and growing our profession?

That's the silver lining.

To me, the biggest thing is that the relative paucity of RP degree programs is not necessarily a bad thing, and it might actually be a benefit to our profession in the long run – but only if we can find a way to bring scientifically and technically savvy people into our

profession. Think of it as an intellectual version of hybrid vigor that adds new viewpoints and new intellectual tools to our ranks. My term for this in "intellectual parallax." That's the silver lining. The cloud here, in the US at least, is that the Health Physics Society isn't trying to capitalize on the silver lining.

Consider

– most of the radiation protection in the US is already being performed by non-RP professionals – by nuclear medicine technicians, workplace health and safety professionals, field engineers, and the like.

Who is a member of HPS?

The US has 4 radioactive materials licenses for every HPS member, and most HPS members don't work as RPOs. But HPS doesn't give any of these people any reason to become HPS members or to consider RP to be anything other than an annoying distraction from what they consider to be their real profession. But think of how much we could strengthen our profession simply by working to find a way to convince, say, a health and safety professional that membership in HPS would benefit their career!

And the laboratory technicians, the medical technicians, the oilfield roughnecks, and all the others who consider themselves to be, at most, radiation-adjacent.

If even 25% of these folks would join HPS we'd double our membership – yet we're not doing anything to attract them.

Which makes me wonder – what's your professional society doing to attract these people?

Of course, this also makes me wonder if there might be an interest among these folks for a nice remote MS degree program to augment all of the in-person programs that are out there. And not only that, but could there be an international standard for such programs, so that a manager in Belgium could confidently hire an RP from the UK with a degree from a university in Italy or Hungary, professional short courses in Greece, and working experience in Canada, knowing that they'd meet a specified standard regarding their knowledge and experience? In an increasingly global community, surely our credentials must be equally global!

My conclusions and appeal

I could go on (and on and on and on), but I'd just be repeating the same basic points:

- If we want our profession to survive, we need to find a way to let people know we exist.
- If we want our profession to grow, we need to find a way to offer value to all those to whom RP is a nuisance that goes along with their real job responsibilities.
- If we want our profession to be internationalized, we need to find a way to formalize equivalencies across borders to that experience, training, and qualifications can be evaluated in any nation, regardless of where they were obtained.

Our profession is necessary, and it's a shame that so few even know of our existence, let alone appreciate the value we add. But it doesn't have to be that way.

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Aus dem IRPA-Bulletin September 2025: EXECUTIVE COUNCIL MESSAGE

KEVIN NELSON beantwortet zu seiner Vorstellung als neues Executive-Committee-Mitglied eine wichtige Frage:

How did you end up in this field of radiation protection?

As with many of us, my path to beginning my radiation protection career was not straight forward. All my relatives were farmers, and I was the first to go to college …

As I discovered, the Public Health program was multi-faceted and on a fateful summer day, I decided to investigate Environmental Health & Safety …

At this time, the United States Environmental Protection Agency had promulgated rules called the Clean Air Act and I asked to speak to the professor in Air Pollution. Unfortunately (or fortunately) he was not present that day, and I was asked to pick another option within the program. My knowledge of radiation was limited to the Three Mile Island incident that had occurred earlier in the year, so it was fresh in my memory, and I asked to speak to the professor in Health Physics. The ensuing 45-minute discussion with Dr. ***Donald Barber*** changed my life forever and I am so grateful to him. It turns out I really enjoyed the science behind radiation physics. I have no regrets not becoming a medical doctor. As Radiation Safety Officer at Mayo Clinic Florida and Mayo Clinic Arizona, I have been able to follow my career passions … working with patients and being a medical health physicist.

STEM education is so important, and I volunteer at local high schools to provide guest lectures whenever possible. Based on my experience, my advice to my daughter and stepsons … it's important to have a broad-based educational background so that when opportunity knocks, it's easier to open the door.

Schriftleitung