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Getting a Handle on IAQ Issues

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Quality Assurance Programs and Testing — Is it a Conflict?

Editor's Note: The free exchange of ideas and opinions is essential to the well-being of any organization. RIA members are invited to share their views and opinions on industry issues in this column. Responses and submissions for future columns should be sent to: Patricia L. Harman, editor-in-chief, at pharman@restorationindustry.org. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the member and not necessarily endorsed by RIA.

As I watch our industry shift towards a greater awareness of IAQ issues when remediating and restoring damaged properties, I have noticed a growing need for consistent practices and methodology for confirming that the services we are billing our clients for are in fact the services they have received. Let me explain.

In water damage, our client, the insured, accepts our “word” that dry standard has been achieved. Our client, the insurer, has been only slightly less naïve and asks for ‘drying documentation’. What is that? In most cases, a daily temperature and humidity reading with grain depression suffices. In a few cases, another sheet of paper that says, “I have tested wet materials with my specialized instruments and determined that they have achieved moisture equilibrium.” Maybe the insured even initials/signs said document. A few more will provide a paper with the words like “drywall west wall of bedroom one — MC 0 percent — dry achieved. March 20.

Check.” Or “plywood sub-floor of kitchen — MC 9 percent — dry. Check.” And we give this along with the air readings to “prove” we dried the structure.

Here's my point. This is a form (however flawed) of an in-house quality assurance program that is accepted by the insurance companies and is paid for as an in-house consulting service. We should be applying this to other areas as well.

Our industry is full of professional consultants salivating around our jobs, trying to get in to spend an hour, charge \$1,000 and sign a statement that we did what we already “documented” and we said we did. Their argument is that anyone else but them is not qualified, not properly insured and conflicted in offering such an opinion on the quality of the job. In certain cases I agree with them, however, the fact is that our client is not interested in taking it to that level on every job. Only for exceptional circumstances.

Let's look outside our industry for a minute. In manufacturing, if you produce a widget, your in-house quality assurance program randomly tests widgets to prove that they meet the “standard” set. If the company is ISO certified, they have developed their Quality Assurance (QA) program to a level where annual audits prove that their in-house QA is objective, accurate and consistent. It's still an in-house QA program. Only in exceptional circumstances is an outside 3rd party expert brought in to prove quality assurance standards are met. Is this a conflict? Absolutely

not! In fact, your liability rates drop as your internal quality assurance program goes up.

Let's bring it back to our industry. In-house Quality Assurance programs tend to be inconsistent and haphazard. There is poor documentation and disconnects abound. Even when restorers argue that they meet the standard, the fact is there is no standard. I believe this is one of the biggest opportunities we have right now as an industry or an association; to develop a standard for In-house QA. Proving dry standard is absolutely important. We all agree and finally through the creative brain trust of guys like Craig Fillman and Ken Larsen, we are developing a standard that needs to be practiced and required industry-wide. Let's move to a bigger issue than dry standard.

Decontamination. Why don't our clients require proof that their contaminated property is actually decontaminated? They sure as heck pay a ton of money for our decon services! Our mandate is to return damaged property to pre-loss condition. Trusting the claims of “juice” manufacturers is the same as suggesting that just because you used a dehumidifier and it looks dry, it must be so. We recognize how preposterous that is, yet we continue to do that with regard to contaminants. I submit to you



that the vast majority in this industry assume they have decontaminated the properties they “remediate.” I really should substitute the word “restore” for “remediate” because most restorers turn their brains off when they see remediate, believing it doesn’t apply to them unless they are performing a “mold/asbestos” job.

Why? First, we have been taught from day one that we are not responsible to decontaminate a water/sewer/dbo/fire site. One reason is the IICRC has taught all technicians they have ever trained to never, ever describe their service as having disinfected anything, ONLY to say that they “applied a disinfectant to affected surfaces.” Most owners were once technicians who were first taught in an IICRC-certified class. Although the intent was risk management, the effect was a cavalier attitude toward disinfection, as if it doesn’t matter a whole lot since we are going to try to shift the blame if it “didn’t work.” This has resulted in an industry-wide defrauding of our clients and a huge level of ignorance on the part of the restorer.

That’s a bold statement, but think about it for a while before reacting. If you don’t test and prove to yourself that the bacteria/virus/mold/blood, etc. is disinfected, you simply have your head in the sand. Remember what ASSUME stands for. We make way too many assumptions in this industry and are so full of ourselves that few question our rhetoric and actually test these assumptions.

People like Kurt Bolden are doing this in the drying field, and we all need to take a hard look at the removal of contaminants. If you can’t see bacteria, spores or other pathogens, and you can’t see the active ingredients in your juice of choice, what makes you think a visual inspection proves anything? If I was an insurance company, I wouldn’t pay a

dime for disinfecting unless you proved to me that you did! I’d bet Ed Cross could add that sweet house in Malibu (from the movie “Ironman”) to his assets if he followed contractors around after their decon work.

Ok, now that I got this off my chest, let me explain where I’m hoping to go with this. I have been testing every job where disinfectant is applied using the Bio-Reveal (ATP) swab analysis system. The data I’ve collected has opened my eyes to assumptions I’ve been carrying around, and given me pause and concern. I believe we can and are morally obligated to provide documentation proving our decontamination to our clients and that this should form a consistent standard and industry practice.

In another article I’ll discuss some of the things I’ve been learning as well as the pros and cons of what kinds of tests and why. I’d like some spirited debate and dialogue on this so email me a graham@genesisrestorations.com. If you’re a consultant and are offended, my apologies. My intent was a slight embellishment to make a point. If you are a restorer and are offended, no apology unless you can show me how your internal QA program is better and you join me in raising the bar. Together we can challenge each other and make this industry better, and provide a better standard of customer care and service. ■

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