A Message from the Editor

The recent massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan have brought to light once again the fragility of life, the power of nature over man, and the public health crises that inevitably result from natural disasters. This disaster has also put the spotlight on occupational hazards. Who can forget the image of the 50 workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant who put themselves in harm's way just days after the quake, working tirelessly in shifts to cool down the spent rods and repair the earthquake-damaged plant?

The fact is that cleanup in the wake of disasters—from the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in 2001, to the flooding after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010, just to name a few—puts workers' health at risk. While these occurrences are not everyday events, they are a reminder that all occupations inherently involve a certain degree of risk. Can you imagine the nuclear power plant workers in Japan not wearing personal protective equipment? Probably not. But how about workers who put their health or safety at risk every day because they do not use adequate protection? Think of office workers who risk carpal tunnel syndrome from not using ergonomic workstations or groundskeepers who do not treasure their hearing enough to wear hearing protection while mowing grass. Workers and employers need to be aware of the health and safety risks involved in their work and be proactive in ensuring that all reasonable precautions are taken to protect their health.

Occupational safety and health—that is, keeping workers safe and healthy on the job—is an important public health topic, no matter what the job is. In this issue of *Public Health Reports* (*PHR*), we examine several efforts to protect workers.

First, Kranwal and colleagues highlight occupational hazards at a microwave popcorn plant in the U.S., where workers exposed to butter-flavoring chemicals had experienced severe, irreversible lung disease. After the plant implemented exposure controls, lung disease risk for much of the plant workforce decreased; however, the authors found that some workers with higher exposure to chemicals would benefit from respiratory protection and regular spirometry testing for lung function. Another respiratory issue, work-related asthma, is the focus of an article by Knoeller et al.

An article by Estes et al. reviews surveillance systems for firefighter fatalities. Much like nuclear power plant workers, firefighters willingly put themselves in hazardous situations where they are at risk for fatal occupational injuries. Estes and colleagues compared case definitions, case ascertainment, and variables to better understand the cause of firefighter fatalities in an effort to direct research and prevention efforts toward minimizing risk.

Occupational health benefits from prevention efforts. Coincidentally, our special supplement on vaccination surveillance accompanies this issue of *PHR*. The epitome of prevention, vaccination is one of the foundations of public health. The accompanying supplement highlights vaccination surveillance efforts in the U.S. and abroad. Beginning with a historical overview of immunization in the U.S., which dates back to before the Revolutionary War, an article by Smith et al. lays the foundation for contemporary vaccination assessment efforts. Articles in this supplement run the gamut from extra-immunization and fragmentation of care, to vaccine delay/refusal and its impact on patient dismissals, to measles underimmunization in Swiss children. Several of the articles conclude that better education and more stringent child care and school-entry requirements regarding vaccinations could help boost vaccination coverage in the U.S. and abroad.

Before I close, I want to thank those of you who have taken the readers' survey posted on the *PHR* website (www.publichealthreports.org). If you have not done so already, please take a few minutes to offer your opinions and thoughts on how well we are doing to meet your needs as a resource for public health professionals. Also, I'd like to give special thanks to Jenny S. Reising for her assistance on this Message from the Editor.

Janice Huy
Captain, U.S. Public Health Service