The most common themes of the queries posted on the ABSA Biosafety Forum are requests for guidance and opinions in order to make decisions regarding guidelines, regulations, or policies, as well as how to apply those documents to our particular entity. Biosafety Professionals are often asked to make decisions in areas where we do not have specific regulations or guidelines to direct us. We are trained to do the “risk assessment” and follow through with recommendations to conduct research and clinical and diagnostic procedures “safely,” which means without undue risk to those conducting the procedures, those in the immediate vicinity of the procedures, and the surrounding environment. We are also asked to interpret “guidelines,” “regulations,” or “policies,” often when the documents to which colleagues are referring can be understood in different ways.

Often we do not have the direct experience to make an experience-based decision, no matter how many years an individual may have in Biosafety and/or microbiology. And to further complicate the situation, we are usually asked to render the decision relatively quickly.

A good guide to making those daily decisions is the Ethics Statement included on the ABSA web page at www.absa.org/biosafety.html. The ABSA Ethics Statement states:

“Members of the American Biological Safety Association (ABSA) are expected to conduct themselves in an ethical manner as they practice their profession. ABSA members should:

• Maintain personal integrity and act responsibly to uphold the integrity of the profession.
• Avoid situations, and actively work to prevent occurrences, presenting a conflict of interest or that will compromise professional judgment.
• Provide biological safety services only in areas of competence.
• Follow recognized biological safety guidelines and standards as set forth by established professional groups or local, state, and federal governmental agencies, centers, or institutes, in performing work in biological safety.
• Provide information regarding potential risks to employee or environmental health and precautions needed to avoid adverse effects.
• Maintain confidentiality regarding services provided.”

One additional statement that I use when making decisions is, “Just because it isn’t illegal doesn’t mean it is right.” If we refer to the ABSA Ethics Statement often and use it as the “Guideline” for our decisions, it will assist in guiding us to the right decisions for the Biosafety Profession.

Guidance Documents for Laboratory Workers

The WHO guidance document, “Laboratory biorisk management for laboratories handling human specimens suspected or confirmed to contain influenza A (H1N1) causing the current international epidemics” is available at: www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/swineflu/LaboratoryHumanspecimensinfluenza/en/index.html

The CDC guidance document, “H1N1 Influenza Virus Biosafety Guidelines for Laboratory Workers” is available at: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidelines_labworkers.htm