

OBITUARIES

David Sencer

Guided and built the US public health agency

Janice Hopkins Tanne

David J Sencer, public health leader (b 1925; q 1951, Michigan), died on 2 May 2011 from complications of heart failure.

David Sencer, who served as head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for 11 years from 1966 to 1977, was “a giant in public health” who lost the job he loved for doing the right thing—trying to immunise the American public against an epidemic.

“My dad’s best accomplishment was not a single achievement but building the CDC community, which reaches around the world. He always put people first, and he knew what was going on everywhere. He’d drop in on people and ask what they were doing—and he’d remember,” said his son Stephen, general counsel and vice president of Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Eradication of smallpox

Thomas Frieden, the current head of CDC, called Sencer a public health giant and said that two of his key contributions were the eradication of smallpox and the founding of the school of public health at Emory University, across the street from the CDC in Atlanta.

Sencer was an invaluable leader during a period when the agency expanded. Elvin Hilyer, who was Sencer’s deputy director, said, “He oversaw a period of growth.” New programmes were added, and CDC was elevated to the same bureaucratic rank as the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration. CDC took responsibility for programmes in malaria, environmental health issues, occupational safety and health, and family planning, among others.

At CDC headquarters in Atlanta Sencer found the people—more than 300 of them—the funds, and the resources to support the successful effort to eradicate smallpox. William Foege, who led the smallpox eradication programme in west Africa and succeeded Sencer as head of CDC, said that Sencer had always been supportive.

In the 1970s Sencer helped to establish a masters course in public health at Emory University’s medical school. Sencer lent staff to the programme and taught courses himself. In 1990 it became the Rollins School of Public Health. He remained involved with the school until his death, said James Curran, the current dean.

But instead of Sencer’s name being linked with his achievements in building CDC into an international scientific powerhouse and in providing the administrative, financial, and personnel support for the eradication of smallpox, too often it is linked to CDC’s response to two unusual disease outbreaks.

In January and February of 1976 about 200 recruits at the Fort Dix army base in New Jersey developed respiratory infections. One died. Researchers found that the cause was a swine flu virus that resembled the strain that caused the 1918-19 flu pandemic. “That puts the fear of God into people,” said Stephen Thacker, who was then just starting out as epidemic intelligence officer, one of CDC’s “disease detectives.” He is now director for the office of surveillance, epidemiology, and laboratory services at CDC and a deputy director.

Sencer and his advisers from major US scientific organisations saw three possibilities for confronting this potentially devastating public health threat. They could do nothing and hope that it went away. They could develop and stockpile a vaccine, with hopes of delivering it quickly when needed. Or they could develop a vaccine and immunise people as fast as they could.

The consensus was to develop a vaccine and immunise the American people as soon as possible, and they did. It was the middle of a presidential election campaign. The then president, Gerald Ford, brought in Sencer as the government’s scientific spokesman in charge. Ford was among the first of more than 40 million Americans to receive the vaccine. No epidemic occurred. But a small number of those receiving the vaccine developed Guillain-Barré syndrome, and more than 20 died.

Meanwhile another outbreak occurred, thought at first to be swine flu. Middle aged army veterans in different cities became ill with a pneumonia that didn’t respond to powerful antibiotics, and 29 died. The press and the public complained that it was taking too long to find the cause.

CDC officers discovered that the veterans had attended an American Legion convention at a hotel in Philadelphia. They found that the pneumonia was caused by a newly identified bacterium, now called *Legionella*, in the hotel’s air conditioning system.

Needle exchange

When Jimmy Carter succeeded Ford as president, Sencer was fired. His colleagues say that although he must have been hurt he never complained. Later, Sencer served for four years as New York City's health commissioner, one of the nation's most important posts. In the early days of the AIDS epidemic he proposed clean needle exchange to prevent transmission among injecting drug users. There was public objection, and it didn't happen then.

David Sencer was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1924. His father died when he was young, and he was raised by his

mother. He interrupted his undergraduate studies on a scholarship at Wesleyan University to serve in the navy, which sent him to medical school at the University of Mississippi. He completed his studies at the University of Michigan, officially in the class of 1951, but received his degree in January 1952 after a delay for hospital treatment of tuberculosis. He received a masters degree in public health from Harvard in 1958.

Sencer leaves his wife Jane, a son, and two daughters.

Cite this as: [BMJ 2011;342:d3276](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.d3276)