

Official known for '76 swine flu fiasco has died

May 3 2011, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- A prominent former federal health official whose career was tainted by controversy over a swine flu campaign in the 1970s has died.

Dr. David Sencer, the former director of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), died in an Atlanta hospital Monday after a bout with pneumonia. He was 86.

He was head of the government health agency from 1966 through 1977, then later served as New York City's health commissioner during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

A respected scientist known for his sharp memory and public policy skills, Sencer was credited with overseeing a variety of disease-fighting campaigns.

He coordinated the CDC's involvement in an international campaign to eradicate smallpox, a historically deadly scourge. The campaign was hugely successful - the last naturally occurring smallpox case was reported in the late 1970s. It also was one of the agency's first major steps into international [public health](#), a field in which the CDC is now considered a leader.

But for most people, Sencer is first remembered for his involvement in the 1976 [swine flu](#) vaccination campaign.

Health officials became alarmed when cases of a [flu virus](#) linked to

swine were detected in soldiers at Fort Dix, N.J., including one young man who died. It reminded them of the terrible Spanish flu pandemic that caused millions of deaths around the world in 1918 and 1919.

Sencer coordinated a series of high-level meetings and recommended to President Gerald Ford that a national vaccination campaign be launched to prevent widespread deaths and illnesses.

More than 40 million Americans were vaccinated, but the epidemic never materialized. Worse, the government began to receive dozens of reports of a paralyzing condition called Guillain-Barre syndrome that was blamed on the vaccine. The campaign was suspended in December of that year and Sencer lost his job.

"He was the scapegoat," said Dr. Howard Markel, a University of Michigan medical historian who knew Sencer.

But experts understand why he chose to be aggressive, and Sencer will be remembered fondly in the public health community, Markel added.

"I'd rather have somebody who over-reacted" than someone who didn't do enough, he said.

Sencer also was in charge in 1976, when CDC investigators identified the bacteria behind an outbreak of strange lung infections at a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion. The condition would become known as Legionnaire's disease.

"He was the longest-serving CDC director and he may have been the most popular," said Dr. Stephen Thacker, a CDC official who was a young investigator on the Legionnaire's case.

He was "a walk-around director" who regularly prowled the agency's

halls and asked people what they were working on, added Thacker, the CDC's Deputy Director for Surveillance, Epidemiology and Laboratory Services

After he left CDC, he took a variety of positions, including heading New York City's health department, which traditionally has been counted - along with CDC director - as one of the top jobs in U.S. public health.

In recent years, he remained an energetic and regular presence at the CDC. He was an adviser for the agency during the 2009 swine flu pandemic, and was sometimes used as a de facto CDC historian. He retained his love for disease examination, and often attended seminars in which young investigators discussed their cases.

Sencer was born in Grand Rapids, Mich., and got his medical degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree in public health from Harvard University.

He is survived by his wife, Jane, and three children.

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