

A Public Health Star Goes Out

Some people we meet through our work affect us well beyond professional exchange. It is with deep regret that we share with you that Dr. William E. Keene, one of the nation's top food safety epidemiologists, died Sunday December 1, 2013 at age 56, from complications of acute pancreatitis.



Dr. Keene (Bill) was known to many as an extraordinarily able voice for public health, and a leader in food safety for two decades at the Oregon Public Health Division. He had a particular reputation for leading and solving outbreak investigations - both within and beyond the borders of his home state - with rigor and a relentless pursuit of the truth.

“When I think of Bill, I hear his voice, on conference calls, at meetings, in the same room. His confidence, passion, and wit kept the dialogue going, as he asked the questions that needed to be asked.” said Robert Tauxe, MD, MPH, Deputy Director, Division of Foodborne, Waterborne, and Environmental Diseases, who knew Bill for more than 20 years. “He was mentor and friend to 15 EIS officers and multiple Preventive Medicine Residents who worked with him in Oregon and to even more who collaborated with him on multi-state teams. Public health officials across the country could count on him for creative practical approaches and insightful judgments. He was a top practitioner of the high art of field epidemiology. No one was better at turning analysis into action, taking an investigation from patients’ homes back to the strawberry field, dairy farm or meat processing plant where the implicated food came from, linking the dots along the way.”


He investigated and published the first outbreaks of *E. coli* O157 infection associated with swimming and with eating contaminated deer meat. In 2006, he cracked the major multi-state outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7 from bagged spinach, along with investigators in Wisconsin and at CDC. His dedication to preventing these infections was displayed on his license plate: Oregon O157H7.

Bill grew up in Seattle, graduated from Yale in 1977 with a degree in physical anthropology, spent two years observing rhesus monkeys in India and Pakistan and then later decided to learn more about parasitology. After getting a PhD in microbiology and a Masters in Public Health from UC Berkeley in 1989, he joined the Oregon State Health Department’s Division of Epidemiology, where, he recently observed, he was still doing the job he had been hired to do 23 years ago. He

returned to India and other Asian countries as a WHO consultant to advise on how they could improve food safety. Along the way, he wrote or co-authored 40 insightful scientific papers detailing seminal investigations. Recently, he served as Director of the [Oregon Integrated Food Safety Center of Excellence](#).

Bill brought his own unique style to work, turning his office into a museum of artifacts collected during investigations, designing a series of comical t-shirts based on pathogens, and sharing pictures he took during his travels with friends far and wide. He loved hiking and camping in the Cascade Mountains, and regularly invited friends and neighbors for an evening watching vintage movies in his back yard.

He is survived by his wife, Elise Gautier, and three siblings. We offer deepest condolences to his family and to his public health colleagues in Oregon. We remember Bill's love of life, including his love for his work and colleagues. His legacy endures in the many colleagues and students he inspired, as well as in solutions to the important public health issues he uncovered. We will miss him greatly.

A celebration of Bill's life is planned for Saturday, December 14 at 1 pm, at the Mississippi Studios in Portland, Oregon. At [Bill Keene Family and Friend's Caring Bride](#)  web page, you can hear and share stories and photos, and soon information will be there about how to donate in his memory. Cards and concerns for his family can be sent to Elise Gautier/Bill Keene, c/o Oregon Public Health Division, Acute and Communicable Disease Prevention Section, 800 NE Oregon Street, Suite 772, Portland Oregon 97232.

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