

OREGON PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION • OREGON HEALTH AUTHORITY

FAREWELL TO A FRIEND

Over the past 23 years or so, we've regularly received mail from *CD Summary* fans, who have expressed appreciation for its readability, conciseness, occasional bits of humor, and even erudition. What our readers may not know is just who has been responsible for the publication's style and cachet.

**BILL THE AUTHOR**

William E. Keene, PhD, MPH, epidemiologist in the Public Health Division's Acute and Communicable Disease Prevention Section, died Sunday, December 1, 2013, after a brief illness. Bill had been hired back in March 1990, and he quickly set about reformatting the *CD Summary*. He subsequently served as its editor for 10 years, during which time he edited every issue, authored many of them himself, and added his inimitable\* style. Articles now began with selections from the works of Edgar Allan Poe or from classics of medical literature such as Peter Panum's observations during the 1846 measles outbreak on the Faroe Islands. Here's just a sample of Bill's memorable *bon mots*:

- (about a dog named Pancho who contracted rabies during a family trip to Mexico) "Several persons were bitten during the course of the automobile trip back to Oregon. That was the end of the road for the increasingly agitated Pancho." [40\(12\), 1991](#).
- "Shigella hit the fan in 1991." [41\(7\), 1992](#).
- "Children who have not been toilet-trained should not be expected to master this skill at the local swimming hole." [41\(12\), 1992](#).
- "While a popular topic around many water coolers, the subtleties of bacterial taxonomy continue to elude many." [43\(4\), 1994](#).
- "Homemade ice cream is a treat as American as apple pie. When made with raw eggs, however, some batches may be remembered for more than their great taste." [43\(4\), 1994](#).



William E. Keene, PhD, MPH. Photo courtesy of Jamie Francis, The Oregonian.

- "The nomenclatural protocols for salmonellae have gone through many revisions. Space considerations preclude an expansive discussion of this fascinating topic." [44\(12\), 1995](#).
- "The reptile cloaca is often difficult to find, and a certain *sangfroid* is necessary when swabbing the occasional python or crocodile." [44\(12\), 1995](#).
- "As another year peters out, we would like to thank the thousands of Oregonians without whose morbidity we would have little about which to wax so prolix." [45\(26\), 1996](#).

**BILL THE EPIDEMIOLOGIST**

A Seattle native, Bill graduated with a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Yale and with a PhD in Microbiology (research focusing on *Entamoeba histolytica*) and Master's degree in Public Health from the University of California-Berkeley.

Bill contributed mightily to public health in Oregon, nationally, and even internationally — first and foremost in the field of enteric disease.† He

investigated and published the first outbreaks of *E. coli* O157 infection associated with swimming and with consumption of contaminated deer meat.<sup>1,2</sup> Back when ground beef was thought to be the source of all foodborne *E. coli* O157 infections, he proved that some were caused by contaminated salad bar items.<sup>3</sup> He was key to solving some the earliest outbreaks associated with alfalfa and other sprouts.<sup>4,6</sup>

Bill pioneered novel methods of solving foodborne outbreaks, including development and refinement of Oregon's so-called "shotgun" questionnaire, novel uses of the binomial statistic, and database development.<sup>7,8</sup> In addition to investigating foodborne outbreaks, Bill made notable contributions in investigating waterborne cryptosporidiosis,<sup>9</sup> outbreaks associated with petting zoos, an outbreak of external ear infections following ear piercing,<sup>10</sup> and even an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a leather spray.

Bill's expertise was broadly sought.<sup>11, 12</sup> His recognized authority during discus-

\* try though we may...

† To quote Bill, "Your vomiting and diarrhea are our bread and butter."



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sions of multi-state foodborne outbreaks contributed to the solution of several that involved Oregon only tangentially. On his own time he served consultancies for the World Health Organization at its headquarters in Geneva and also in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, and Sudan; and he consulted in Iran and in Taiwan.

#### **BILL THE ARTIST**

Bill's work was anything but commonplace: it was beautiful. When Bill was tasked to author a set of guidelines to be used by local public health officials in their investigation of reported diseases, he combined rigorous attention to detail with a handsome layout to produce a set of guidelines deemed worthy of imitation by several other states. His sense of public health history led him to create an Outbreak Museum within the confines of his office, memorializing dozens of famous disease outbreaks with products implicated over the past two decades.

Bill's interest in making epidemiologic data accessible inspired the creation of elegant databases for outbreak logging and investigation, along with the "Orpheus" reportable disease database employed by Oregon's local public health agencies. Characteristic of the artistic sense with which he approached his work is the panoply of paintings that greet the user upon opening this database; Bill had painstakingly photographed them at art museums around the world.

Bill held himself as well as others to high standards; those of us who suffered the trauma of having Bill edit one of our *CD Summary* drafts can attest to these standards. He had an

eagle eye for unsupported assertions, unchallenged assumptions, faulty reasoning, vague recommendations, even trivial mistakes in syntax and punctuation. He had a habit of stating the truth as he saw it, often bluntly, whether it was welcome or no.

But Bill was also tremendously personable. He was ever available, and he shared his expertise with epidemiologists TNTC. He seemed always to have a hot pot of tea ready for a visitor. He hosted at his home irregular meetings of the "Portland Film Society," inviting all who were interested to view a film while enjoying each other's company.

#### **Bill Keene Guest Book and Memorial Scholarship Fund**

You can visit and sign Bill's Guest Book at [www.caringbridge.org/visit/billkeeneepi](http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/billkeeneepi). A scholarship fund has been established in Bill's honor; to donate, visit <https://secure2.osac.state.or.us/ccorders/donations.aspx>.

A memorial was held in Portland December 14 in celebration of Bill's life; you can view the testimonials at <http://new.livestream.com/accounts/6121563/events/2614327?query=keene%20&cat=event>. Please keep his wife Elise in your thoughts; and pause now and then while you're reading the *CD Summary* to remember the brilliant and dedicated soul who made it what it is, and without whom public health in Oregon will never be quite the same.

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