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Press Release

CDC celebrates 50 years of disease investigations by the Epidemic Intelligence Service

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced today a year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS). EIS officers – more popularly known as disease detectives – have made headlines for their investigations of epidemics including *E. coli*, hantavirus and West Nile virus. They've also been portrayed in Hollywood movies such as "Outbreak" and "And the Band Played On."

The EIS was established in 1951 following the start of the Korean War as an early-warning system against biological warfare and man-made epidemics. The program, comprising medical doctors, researchers and scientists who serve in two-year assignments, today has expanded into a surveillance and response unit for all types of epidemics, including chronic disease and injuries.

Events to commemorate the EIS anniversary will be held throughout the year. CDC will host the annual EIS Conference at the Emory Conference Center in Atlanta on April 23-27, 2001, preceded by the first-ever alumni weekend.

The brave, dedicated public health officers who comprise the EIS have been on the front lines of the most challenging health threats to our nation and to the world," said CDC Director Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan. "People are healthier and safer because of their sacrifices and accomplishments in controlling and preventing disease."

Over the past 50 years, EIS officers have played pivotal roles in combating the root causes of major epidemics. The EIS played a key role in the global eradication of smallpox by sending officers to the farthest reaches of the world; restored public confidence in the first polio vaccine after a defective

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vaccine led to panic; and discovered how the AIDS virus was transmitted. More recently, EIS officers have documented the obesity epidemic in the U.S., helped states to reduce tobacco use and have studied whether disease outbreaks were a result of bioterrorism. Many of the nation's medical and public health leaders, including CDC directors and deans of the country's top schools of public health, are EIS alumni.

Current CDC Director Koplan joined the EIS in 1972. His assignment took him to Bangladesh, one of the last outposts of smallpox infection, and, along with other EIS colleagues, helped eradicate smallpox from the world.

The legacy of Alexander Langmuir

Perhaps no one has contributed to the strength of the EIS more than the organization's founder, Alexander Langmuir. Langmuir was an associate professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health when he became CDC's chief epidemiologist in 1949. Langmuir, who died in 1993, was brought in to combat a perceived epidemic of malaria in the southeastern United States. After a detailed investigation, he discovered that there was no epidemic.

After establishing the EIS program in 1951, Langmuir spent the next 29 years building the program into the world's most renowned epidemiology organization. He personally trained officers on the science of epidemiology, or connecting disease or injury with a cause. The EIS symbol, appropriately, is a worn shoe sole inside a globe. This symbol represents the thousands of EIS officers who wear out their shoe soles tracing the causes of epidemics, uncovering how they are spread, and providing a basis for their control.

EIS' expanding role

Originally, EIS officers selected for two-year field assignments were primarily medical doctors and other health professionals, such as sanitarians, dentists and veterinarians. Their focus was infectious disease outbreaks. Today, the EIS welcomes public health professionals, including post-doctoral scientists in statistics, epidemiology, microbiology, anthropology, sociology and the behavioral sciences. The scope of work has also expanded to include chronic disease, environmental health, injury, violence prevention, and workplace health and safety.

Currently, 60 to 80 people are selected annually for coveted EIS posts. Since 1951, nearly 2,500 EIS officers have responded to requests for epidemiological assistance within the United States and throughout the world. Each year, EIS

officers are involved in several hundred investigations of disease and injury problems. Their research enables CDC and its public health partners to make recommendations to improve the public's health and safety.

EIS officers are increasingly diverse and global in their focus. In 2001, about 60 percent are women and 25-30 percent are minorities. Today's officers also are equipped with more sophisticated tools and training, and they use laptops and the Internet to stay connected, according to Dr. Stephen Thacker, CDC's chief epidemiologist.

"Today, EIS officers receive more sophisticated training in epidemiological and statistical methods, as well as exposure to economics and the behavioral and social sciences. CDC's move into chronic disease, injury and environmental health makes these tools very essential," noted Thacker, who foresees a greater globalization of the EIS in the future.

As a new era begins, CDC Director Koplan sees EIS officers continuing to tackle public health challenges in new ways, while being a formidable force on the front lines of disease prevention and surveillance.

EIS officers of the new millennium will face some of the old as well as totally new public health challenges – new infectious diseases, health disparities among different population groups, the toll of violence in society, and how to encourage healthy behaviors so that people not only live longer lives but healthier lives," said Koplan. "It is CDC's job to provide these disease detectives with the training and the tools to protect people's health and safety."

To learn more about the history of the EIS or events planned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the EIS, please visit the CDC online at www.cdc.gov/eis.

About the CDC

CDC protects people's health and safety by preventing and controlling diseases and injuries; enhances health decisions by providing credible information on critical health issues; and promotes healthy living through strong partnerships with local, national and international organizations.

Note to Reporters: CDC will arrange for interviews with current and former EIS officers, as well as provide photos and footage. Call (404) 639-3286 for more information.

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