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***[Virginia Prescott] Well we hear about the CDC when there is a potential health crisis like Zika or Ebola. What does the CDC do the rest of the time?***

[Wendy Parmet] Well the CDC has a very broad mission and has a lot of different activities. Most importantly perhaps it gathers data or surveillance it finds out what's going on in terms of people's health and it reports on that. It analyzes and puts out reports important data and informs the public and informs state local and territorial health workers around the country to keep people healthy in their areas. It also gives out grants and training grants that support state local and territorial agencies and has 20 quarantine stations around the country where you can quarantine people and carry out investigations when people come into the country or merchandise can come into the country. That may in fact spread disease. CDC has a very broad mandate.

***[VP] There's a lot going on there so we'll dig into that but I'm curious why and when it was established?***

[WP] Well the CDC was established in 1946 and its original mission interestingly was to stop the spread of malaria in the south because at that time malaria really was endemic in much of the American South. And guess what it accomplished that mission. And over time its mission has broadened. But we need the CDC because although we Americans like to think that we can protect ourselves and protect the health of ourselves and our families in many ways we really can't do that right.

That's obvious when emergencies like Zika or you know zombie apocalypse or hurricanes. But it's also true with respect to day in and day out health problems. CDC provides us with the information we need. The CDC trains our health care workers in our local health care workforces so that we can understand what's going on and what things are putting us in our communities at risk.

***[VP] Well so if we're looking at Disease Control and Prevention protection what kind of power does it have in terms of protecting public health, I mean can it influence public policy?***

[WP] Well it certainly can influence public policy, it influences public policy. You know by analyzing researching figuring out what's going on getting the best practices getting that information out. Preparing guidances that are very influential.

***[VP] So what might be an example of that for example I'm you know Zika virus for example cases found in the Southeast in Florida in Texas a few years ago. How does the CDC actually create programs to work on something like that on a federal level?***

Well first of all the CDC investigates. They have something called the epidemiological information service and they go out and they send people out into a community. Maybe there are reported cases in Zika in South Florida. They investigate they find out what's going on where is the problem. They then work with and advise in a situation like that. Local health agencies they provide a lot of training for local agencies. They also have some grant money that they can distribute to local agencies community organizations health workers et cetera so they can be influential in many ways even when they don't actually have regulatory authorities. So in many situations like Zika they publish guidance. It is not binding but they're telling local agencies what are the best practices they're telling health care providers what to do what to look out for. And of course they're telling people what you can do to protect yourself and your family.

***[VP] How about real life examples of the CDC's succeeding or failing in the face of a disease outbreak?***

[WP] Well the CDC has had many successes often in partnership with other agencies but we don't have malaria in the south. That was its primary mission and that was mission accomplished. The CDC was also a key partner in the global health effort to eradicate smallpox and fortunately smallpox no longer is out in the wild anymore. You know it was huge throughout history – a major scourge. CDC has had many, many successes many of them are in partnership with other health agencies around the globe. CDC has also had some you know not so great moments.

One is 1976, CDC was one of the agencies that advise the president than President and for that there was a potential outbreak of what then was known as swine flu and people were very scared that this outbreak could be catastrophic similar to the 1918 pandemic that killed millions of millions of people in response to that. The government the federal government established a swine flu vaccine program vaccine was rushed into production and the goal was to vaccinate everybody. Turns out there never was a flu outbreak and there were fears and people who had adverse actions to the vaccine. So that was one of their lesser moments.

The CDC was also involved to a degree in the rather infamous Tuskegee syphilis study where African-American men in the South were followed while syphilis and not given treatments that were available.

***[VP] How is the CDC's role different than that of other federal agencies that have some relationship to public health like the FDA or OSHA or the EPA for example?***

[WP] Well I think the CDC is different in two interesting and important ways. First it's not primarily a regulatory agency. Again it has some regulatory authority like with quarantine but it's primarily a research analysis training and support agency. So it's different than an agency that's mostly focused on regulation and enforcement like FDA. And it often works in partnership with and provides advice to those kinds of agencies. Secondly it’s powers are not as deep as say an FDA. They're broader its mission is broader so FDA is looking at drugs, OSHA's looking on workplace safety, nets is looking at transportation safety. We have a lot of federal agencies with authority over a particular sector of the economy or a particular set of health problems. CDC is looking at prevention and health broadly. One day it could be helmet's then there could be a new problem Zika nobody ever heard of it. It can be infectious disease it's chronic disease injury prevention. So it's very broad but different because it's not focused on regulation.

***[VP] How does the CDC gather data on disease and public health conditions?***

[WP] Well they have many different sources but one critical source is from state public health departments. So around the country states require health care providers laboratories physicians hospitals to report certain conditions. So if certain diseases are known as reportable somebody has the mumps it has to be reported to the state health agency. That information is then it's often shared with CDC identified ways but CDC therefore can monitor what's going on around the country through its relationship with state health departments. Another way that CDC does it is through an investigation on the ground it can gather information. So it has teams of you know sometimes they're called the disease detectives. They go into an area where there's a potential outbreak maybe a hospital has called them and said we're seeing something strange here you know people are coming in with unusual symptoms what's going on and they go on the ground they talk to people they talk to the physicians they can interview or work with local officials interviewing people patients patient contacts trying to find out you know was there a common source. Was there food; was there an exposure to a toxin? So they actually do have disease detectives on the ground that they can fly into a problem.

***[VP] It's fascinating to hear about the relationship between the federal role for the CDC and its interaction with states, state by state. Is that something that evolved over the years, I mean obviously diseases do not observe state or international borders.***

[WP] Well under our constitutional system states have primary responsibility for protecting the health of people in the state under what's known as the states police power and the federal government's authority. Originally and still today is limited the federal government has to have what's known as enumerated powers interstate commerce being one federal spending for the general welfare being another control of the borders being another. And originally the federal role was pretty limited but over time the federal role has expanded. And Congress has created all these laws and agencies that we know so well such as the FDA, EPA, but the CDC operates in this interesting in-between space where federal activity is very useful because in truth the federal government has far greater resources than states and local governments. But the federal government is not for the most part exercising its regulatory authority rather we're still relying on the state regulatory authority and so the CDC often operates uses federal money to be you know super expert guidance for state and local governments as opposed to federal agencies such as FDA that are created by Congress specifically to deal with one thing or a few things - Food and Drugs - and then actually have what is known as preemptive authority they actually take away the power of the states and only the federal government can license pharmaceuticals for example.

So the CDC is operating in this in-between very interesting space where the federal government is very active but it's not for the most part exercising regulatory authority or overriding the state. Instead it's using its authority to provide guidance and support for the state.