

Top food-safety sleuth Bill Keene, 56, dies

One of the nation's foremost food safety sleuths died on Sunday. Bill Keene, a senior epidemiologist with the Oregon Public Health Authority in Portland, died of acute pancreatitis. [Written by Elizabeth Weise, USATODAY](#)



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Keene was a nationally known investigator of food-borne disease outbreaks

He was a senior epidemiologist with the Oregon Public Health Authority

He found the sources of multiple food-borne illness outbreaks

One of the nation's foremost food-safety sleuths died on Sunday. Bill Keene, a senior epidemiologist with the Oregon Public Health Authority, in Portland, was responsible for saving countless lives because of his dogged investigations of food-borne illness outbreaks, colleagues said.

"Bill was one of the best, and an extraordinarily able voice for public health," said Robert Tauxe, who directs food-borne illness outbreak investigations for the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Uppermost in Keene's thoughts was always the safety of the people he served, said Craig Wilson, food safety director for Costco in Issaquah, Wash. "Bill's focus was always public health," Wilson said. "The sooner he gets done, the more people he could keep from getting ill. Our food-safety community has lost a significant pillar. He will be very difficult to replace."

Keene, 56, died of acute pancreatitis caused by gallstones. He had been ill less than two weeks, said Katrina Hedberg, Oregon's state epidemiologist.

Keene and his team of over 30 staffers helped crack numerous national outbreaks. He was known for hopping in his car to drive as far as necessary to get to the bottom of what was making people sick.

In 2011, Oregon public health officials noticed an uptick in cases of E. coli O157:H7, a deadly form of the disease. Interviews seemed to pinpoint strawberries, but the fruit had never been known to carry O157:H7.

"So Bill jumped in his car and drove over 100 miles to take samples in the strawberry field," Hedberg said. Keene collected deer feces and proved that deer could bring E. coli into fields that could then be passed on to humans who ate what was grown there.

His car even sported a personalized license plate: O157:H7.

In 2009, 3-year-old Jacob Hurley testified before a House subcommittee in Washington, D.C., about how sick he was when he became part of a national outbreak of salmonella that was eventually linked to peanut butter produced by the Peanut Corporation of America in Blakely, Ga.

"But it was Bill who went to Jacob's house to collect the leftover peanut butter crackers" so they could be tested, Hedberg said.

"There are not many in food safety that you can look at and say, 'This person really made a difference' — but Bill was one of those few people," said David Acheson, president of the Acheson Group, which works with companies to improve food safety. He is a former FDA associate commissioner of foods. "Bill's tenacity and insight saved lives, and he was truly a legend in terms of his epidemiological abilities."

Keene was one of the investigators who helped identify jalapeño peppers as the source of a national outbreak of salmonella that sickened more than 1,200 and killed two people in 2008. Federal officials initially linked the outbreak to tomatoes, but Keene helped figure out that it wasn't the tomatoes but something commonly eaten with tomatoes. That led him to salsa and then to the peppers that give salsa its kick.

He wasn't afraid of taking on big companies if he thought public health was in danger. Keene "linked salmonella to Del Monte cantaloupe from Guatemala and got sued for his efforts" in a 2011 outbreak, said Doug Powell, a former professor of food safety at Kansas State University. "The company lost."

"He was unique — even though he worked for government, he wasn't a suit," Powell said.

In fact Keene was known for putting out news releases fingering food items in ongoing national outbreaks before federal public health officials had made up their minds what was behind them. "Put a fork in it, it's done!" he would say.

One of Keene's most important contributions to outbreak investigations was what he called his "shotgun questionnaire," used by public health workers investigating outbreaks. The survey ran as long as 20 pages and systematically went through more than 400 specific food items. "It's like a shotgun full of pellets — you hit everything," he said in an interview with USA TODAY in 2007.

When investigators couldn't figure out what was causing an outbreak, Keene's team would call everyone who'd gotten sick and go through the full survey with them. The answers they got helped tease out food culprits that no one had even known could cause illness.

One example was raw almonds, which were linked to an outbreak of salmonella that sickened people in 12 states and Canada in 2004. No one knew almonds could carry salmonella, until the shotgun questionnaire helped pinpoint them as the source. That led to more than 13 million pounds of almonds being recalled by the producer, according to a CDC report about the outbreak.

Keene worked as an epidemiologist in Oregon's Acute and Communicable Disease Prevention section for 23 years. A Seattle native, he graduated from Yale and the University of California-Berkeley with a doctorate in public health.

He was deeply respected for his intelligence and tenacity and lauded by public health workers nationally and internationally. His team in Oregon and the Minnesota Public Health Department (home to "Team Diarrhea," public health graduate students who investigate more than 1,000 food-illness cases a year) collaborated on many investigations. The two public health departments maintained a friendly rivalry.

"On Monday morning, a huge bouquet of flowers arrived for the Oregon Health Department," Hedberg said. "It was from the Minnesota Department of Health."

Keene is survived by his wife of 30 years, Elise Gautier, his sisters, Pam Keene and Beverly Keene, and his brother, David Keene.