"Menace Man"

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"We live in such a mobile society. I have two little girls in traveling recreation programs and they travel all over the area. Over three hundred kids are in traveling sports in West Salem alone. I do what I do to keep them safe." Dave Geske spoke in the middle of his office filled with pictures of his two daughters, Dana and Emily. Dave works tirelessly every day to insure the safety of not only his own family, but also the families of all those around him. Dave is not a doctor, a police officer, nor anything else one would normally associate with keeping children safe. He is the La Crosse County Vector Control Manager. Dave's job is to monitor mosquitoes and ticks and other vectors of diseases in La Crosse County in western Wisconsin. He then uses this information to track diseases and harmful viruses in order to alert the public to health risks.

Dave was a veterinary science major in the Navy until he realized that being a veterinarian would be too competitive and was not the right area for him. "I looked really good in white, that was the positive side to being in the Navy," Dave remarked with a chuckle. "Then I realized that being a vet was not what I wanted to do." Dave then went into the biology program and graduated with a masters in biology with an emphasis on vector born diseases. Vectors are defined as "mosquitoes, ticks, or other organisms that transmit diseases"
Dave admitted that he has always had a fascination with mosquitoes from the time that he was a small child. He did not always know that he could work with these menaces for a career.

"I always had an interest in the sciences," Dave remarked. "I find life forms fascinating. I guess what got me interested in bugs was the fact that I had encephalitis when I was five. It was really traumatic for my parents so it became a large part of my life."

After graduating with a biology degree focused on arbo-viral diseases (mosquito and tick born diseases), Dave began looking for a job. He first applied to be in the vector control department in Cleveland, Ohio. However, Dave did not find this city an appealing place to work. "Big, dirty, and scary" was the way that Dave described Cleveland. He then applied to work in La Crosse. He was originally from the mid-west so he felt right at home in western Wisconsin. Dave has worked in the La Crosse Country Vector Control office for his entire professional career, which is approaching twenty-five years.

Dave has many people that he considers role models in his profession. Ironically, his childhood pediatrician is one of these mentors. Dr. Cameron Gundersen treated Dave when he was young, but also became an important contributor to the field that Dave now enjoys. Dr. Gundersen was instrumental in isolating a type of encephalitis that Dave now works with on a regular basis. In 1964, Gundersen and a colleague, Wayne Thompon, "isolated a viral agent from the postmortem brain of a 4-year-old victim of the malady " (Hendersen 24). They named the disease they found La Crosse
encephalitis. Dave considers Dr. Gundersen an influence on his work. Dave also works closely with a man by the name of Dr. James Perry. Perry is a University of Utah graduate whom Dave describes as "very brilliant and helpful." Together, Dave and Dr. Perry have successfully kept many diseases under control to protect the citizens in their respective areas.

La Crosse encephalitis, a vector born disease that targets the human nervous system, is one of the most prevalent diseases that Dave works with in his area. "Ninety-five percent of cases (of La Crosse encephalitis) occur in persons aged less than 18 years" according to a Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (16). Dave's goal of keeping children safe proves to be very relevant to this in the fact that most cases of encephalitis he sees are in young children. He also is beginning to express a concern about West Nile Virus, a disease vectored by birds, which is a new disease to the United States. While another disease seen in the area on rare occasions Lyme's disease. All three of these diseases are very dangerous in the fact that "serologic studies suggest that approximately one in 150 infected persons develop neurological disease requiring hospitalization" (Emerging Infectious Disease 643). Dave views screening for these diseases as how he contributes to the whole of the society—his place in the world.

While there is no one "typical" day at the office for Dave, a certain pattern generally develops, and there are always many interruptions. Routines also change depending on the season. During the summer, the mornings usually begin with a briefing of the staff
under Dave's direction. Dave discusses with his staff, often including five to fifteen students, information gathered from monitoring vector habitats and the traps that are set up all over the county. Assignments for the day, such as trap gathering and analysis, are then made and the meeting concludes. Dave then usually ventures down the halls to check in with the animal control department. Dave works closely with this department, because animals like dogs and cats can also be used as hosts for vector born diseases. He is in charge of setting up programs in both this department and his own to ensure the safety of the public. After checking to make sure all programs are running well in animal control, Dave wanders back to his office to begin his individual work.

Through the middle part of a typical summer day, Dave spends his time assessing the specimens brought in from the traps by the students he employs. He also is responsible for enforcing codes in the area. For example, he is required to give tickets to people who have tires with standing water in their yards which are prime mosquito breeding grounds. Dave often discovers these health hazards through calls from concerned citizens.

"I always warn the offender first," Dave said in reference to the tire offenders. "But the tires are just too dangerous because they are nesting grounds for mosquitoes which can lead to encephalitis outbreaks. I don't like giving tickets, but I have to do it anyway."

Dave summarizes his summer routines into three words "assess, enforce, and flow." First, he is responsible for assessing the information brought in from traps. Dave also assesses information
from bordering counties in order to know how to better protect his county. Additionally, he is in charge of enforcing environmental codes that pertain to vector born diseases through prosecuting policy violations. Finally, Dave is required to make sure that all programs under his control are flowing well and operating efficiently.

During the winter, Dave's daily routines change. Because winter in Wisconsin is not inviting to vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks, Dave's work shifts from gathering species from traps to collecting different types of data such as data from counties all over the United States. Winter is also the season in which he spends more time writing reports and other documents. "I'm always writing reports," Dave said as he motioned to a report sitting on his slightly disorganized desk. "This one is for the DNR on bacteria used to kill mosquitoes." Dave does reports for many organizations during the winter. These organizations include the Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota and Wisconsin Divisions of Health, the Center for Disease Control, and many others. The La Crosse County Vector Control Office is a model program for the nation. It is looked at as one of the top programs in the United States. So often other organizations are referred to Dave for help. Dave finds great pride in helping other programs become successful.

Perhaps Dave's favorite part of his winters is his time off. "During the summer I work at least a little everyday," he explains. "The winter is time for me to take some time off and relax with my family." Dave also enjoys the very beginning and end of winter.
During the fall and spring, the students he employs during the summer are still in school, so Dave collects specimen from the traps on his own. He enjoys his time to be outside and bond with nature. “The La Crosse Area is so beautiful,” Dave remarks, “and when I’m checking traps I get to enjoy it to its fullest.”

Even though a majority of Dave’s tasks differ between winter and summer, some responsibilities span the entire year. For example, one of Dave’s jobs is to provide important information to the media. Dave is the general public’s resource for health information regarding vector born diseases. He takes this role very seriously and strives to properly inform the public of serious health risks whenever possible. Dave tells of a story when his duty to inform the public caused waves in his department. The media often wants to know when diseases begin to break out in the spring. A case of La Crosse encephalitis was thought to have been discovered in a neighboring county and Dave went to investigate since he is an authority on this disease. The media called during this time to inquire whether there had been any cases of diseases yet that year. “I told them that there were signs that this might be La Crosse encephalitis,” Dave recalls. “The case met the state criteria for a possible case of encephalitis, but it was still suspect. I told them the truth that we weren’t sure and the matter would be further investigated.” When the local newspaper reported that a possible case of encephalitis in a neighboring county, a county official became very upset. He felt that Dave had attacked him and made it look like he was not doing good work in his county.
“He overreacted,” Dave states. “The article clearly stated that there were possibilities of encephalitis. I thought the official was doing well with the limited resources he had available to him. I was simply making the public aware of a risk. I guess he thought I was trying to make him look bad.”

Dave admits that some agencies get “bent out of shape” when the media gets ahold of information that has not been officially confirmed. “I am forthright with the media when they ask questions,” Dave says. “It is my responsibility to keep the public informed even if it does make people upset.”

Dealing with the media can sometimes cause problems, but Dave finds another aspect of his year round work more difficult. Dave is in charge of taking agencies and individuals to court when policies or procedures related to vector born diseases are broken. He does not have a strong background in law, so he finds this aspect of his job challenging. Even though it is difficult for him, Dave enjoys the legal area of his job as well.

“I like working with the law,” Dave explains. “Sometimes it is difficult though. The attorneys seem to be the biggest obstacle.” Dave recalls one case that caused problems. The case was related to implementing policies in La Crosse County and Houston County, the county across the Mississippi. His county felt a certain policy would help to create a better connection between the two areas, yet officials from Houston County felt the policy was unneeded. Attorneys then became involved.
"Attorneys tend to be adversarial," Dave remarks. "It's not in their nature to cooperate. It's hard to remind them that we have to work together in order to ensure public safety." Dave explains that this case was important because it is essential to maintain communication with bordering counties. He is adamant about the fact that when it comes to diseases, officials cannot be bound to their county lines. "It's important for us to work together," he reiterates. "If we don't, we're not protecting our citizens. Even if I'm doing a stellar job here in La Crosse County, I still have to be concerned about what is going on in Houston and Trempealeau counties. Diseases don't just stay in one county, they travel, and so do we."

Through his words and actions, Dave shows that he is more concerned about his work than most county vector control agents. For example, the legal situation with the agent in Minnesota shows that Dave is more conscientious about the entire population, not just the citizens of his own county. Many control agents tend to get wrapped up in their own county and begin to compete with other agents for status or recognition. For example, the policy dispute dealt with information sharing. Dave felt that it was necessary to have a code requiring sharing of information on health risks between the two counties. However, the vector control agent in Houston County felt that he would be being "supervised" by Dave under this policy and found the policy unnecessary.

Dave feels this defeats the entire point of vector control because the object to the profession is to use all resources, including
other vector control agents, to foster a healthy environment for the human race. Dave remarks, “My job is all about collaboration. It requires sharing of information constantly because bugs travel, they get around. If I don’t know what’s going on in the rest of the country, I can’t say that I’m doing a good job. Unfortunately, I know some control agents that think they need to hide their information so that they can be recognized for unique programs in their county. It’s sad actually.”

It becomes evident that Dave goes above his call of duty in his field because he works with large, national organizations. The Center for Disease Control is often in contact with La Crosse County because of the quality of Dave’s work. Oftentimes, the CDC has contacted Dave with questions regarding the programs he has designed. This is a great source of pride for Dave and for the entire county.

Dave also stands out above many of his colleagues because he has a drive to stay on top of new information. His curiosity about his work leads him to continually research and network in order to find new diseases and ways to prevent them. He admits, “Research is exciting to me; I love it. But it is also really important. I get upset when I hear of other counties not staying current on information and saying ‘It works now, it will work then.’ My field is always changing. That’s why staying up on information is imperative.” A good example of the importance of staying well informed comes from a situation with West Nile Virus in New York.
“Surveillance of mosquitoes, sentinel birds, and dead birds for West Nile virus in America warned of this summer’s impending outbreak. Consequently the number of human cases was minimised by advising people to avoid mosquito bites and by implementing measures to reduce the mosquito population, such as removing breeding sites and spraying” (British Medical Journal 1484). Human lives were saved in New York because of vector control agents staying current on the local health risks. Dave compares favorably with the New York control agents because of the fact that he is constantly researching in order to protect La Crosse area citizens from health hazards.

Dave’s dedication to his work is also shown in his enthusiasm about vector conferences. Although he does not like to travel and spend time away from his family, Dave loves the contact he has with other vector control agents at conferences. He enjoys learning as much as possible from them and sharing his own experiences so that others can help to keep the world safe from diseases. These conferences are often not required, but Dave chooses to leave the family he loves for short periods of time in order to devote his time to his work.

When asked about obstacles in his job, Dave confirms again that legal issues tend to complicate his work. He also addressed the issue of funds. Governor McCallum, Wisconsin’s present governor, is proposing a plan to cut state spending which would drastically cut Dave’s budget in the Vector Control office. This upsets Dave because his office is operating on a tight budget as it is. “People don’t think about programs such as ours when they hear about tax breaks,” Dave
makes clear. "We're a somewhat hidden operation that affects the county greatly even when they don't realize it." Dave fears that McCallum's plan will pass and his funding will be cut. He has expressed his concerns through letters to the governor, but stresses that ultimately, the citizens of Wisconsin will decide his financial fate. Through it all though, he maintains an optimistic attitude. He insists that no matter what his budget is, he will make good use of it in order to protect his constituents.

Regardless of the obstacles he faces, Dave maintains that there are far more rewards for doing his job. Dave's basic motivation in his line of work comes from his experience with his first case in 1977. Dave will never forget the impacts of this time. A three-year-old girl in De Soto, Wisconsin, was diagnosed with La Crosse encephalitis. Fresh on the job, Dave went to meet the girl and her parents. Although La Crosse encephalitis does not generally have a high death rate, this little girl's temperature rose to dangerous levels and she passed away. He realized that this is what could happen if proper controls on vector born diseases are not implicated. The death of this little girl set Dave on a course to strive to become the best in his line of work. Even to this day, twenty-five years later, Dave still looks at this case as a motivation to do well.

Dave's vocation is to protect the members of his area. His passion lies in ensuring kids do not get sick from diseases that can be prevented with certain controls. Dave's rewards come from knowing that he made an impact on the number of arbo-viral cases in the county
and knowing that a large amount of children are not becoming ill because of his efforts.

Tom Patrick, a fireman interviewed for Stud Terkel's *Working*, comments on the importance of protecting people: "I worked in a bank. You know, it's just paper. It's not real... You're looking at numbers. But I can look back and say, 'I helped put out a fire. I helped save somebody.' It shows something I did on this earth" (Terkel 589). Dave has a similar outlook on his job. He states, "What I love most about this job, I can't see. I will never know how many people I save through my efforts. All I know is that there are kids out there that aren't getting sick because of the programs I have created." Like Patrick, in *Working*, Dave takes pride in the difference he makes in his community which gives value to his job.

Dave Geske is a man with a big heart and a desire to help. He lives out his vocation to protect people through an obscure job that many never know exists. Working with insects, diseases, and the media does not strike many as a dream job. However, as the vector control agent for La Crosse County, Wisconsin, Dave answers his call to be a protector of all and a menace to all health menaces.


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