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US Congress eyes CDC's lingering morale problems

An ambitious effort to reorganise the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has triggered morale problems at the agency, an exodus of senior staff—including high-profile scientists—and, now, investigations by the US Congress. Alison Young reports from Atlanta.

Over the past 3 years, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been roiled by internal turmoil and an exodus of high-profile scientists. Now questions about the agency's leadership are drawing increased scrutiny from members of Congress. Their concern is that a massive reorganisation of one of the world's premier public-health institutions, strategic changes in its focus, and the loss of key staff may be harming its scientific ability.

In its storied 60-year history, the CDC finds itself in an unusual and uncomfortable position. The agency is accustomed to accolades and being held up as a model government agency, uniquely located in Atlanta, far away in distance and culture from Washington. But CDC director Julie Gerberding—who has declined repeated requests for an interview—has faced a rising chorus of criticism from inside and outside the CDC questioning her leadership and vision for the agency.

Stephen Thacker, director of CDC's Office of Workforce and Career Development, said he thinks concern within the agency is abating. "I would say things, from my point of view, are getting better." Thacker said that most of the organisational change is done and that talented new leaders have been placed within the new structure, allowing staff to focus on public health.

Although the agency's internal surveys showed most staff supported Gerberding's plan at the start, their confidence quickly eroded. Between 2003 and 2005, the proportion of CDC staff who reported that they thought the reorganisation would improve the agency dropped from 58% to 35%. Meanwhile, senior leaders, midlevel managers, and high-

profile scientists left at what current and former CDC officials have called an unprecedented rate. Since 2004, all but two of the directors of what were CDC's eight primary scientific centres left the agency. Gone are names long associated with CDC's scientific prowess: Walter Orenstein, director of the National Immunization Programme; James Hughes, director of the National Center for Infectious Diseases; James Marks, director of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; Harold Jaffe, director of the National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention; and Roger Glass, chief of the agency's Viral Gastroenteritis Section.

"A whole senior cadre of experienced public health professionals have left and with it some very important institutional memory", said Jeff Levi, executive director of the Trust for America's Health—a non-profit organisation based in Washington that evaluates public-health preparedness across the USA. "On a day-to-day basis we may not notice its absence, but when we face very difficult situations

or a crisis, we will be missing it more than we realise."

Although Thacker and CDC observers say there has been a slow-down in high-profile departures, Levi said that does not indicate employees are happy. Many are biding their time until the 2008 presidential election, Levi said, in hopes of a change in leadership of the federal government and CDC. "I think most people know exactly how many days are left in this administration", Levi said.

In December, 2005, five former CDC directors sent a rare joint letter to Gerberding expressing "great concern" about staff losses and a tumultuous climate within the agency that "is not healthy for public health or for the CDC". The letter was signed by William Foege (1977–83); David Satcher (1993–98); James Mason (1983–89); David Sencer (1966–77); and Jeffrey Koplan (1998–02).

Although they have generally declined interview requests about problems at CDC, including for this feature, Foege and Sencer both expressed continued concern about morale at a round-table discussion

See [Editorial](#) page 193

Alison Young covers the CDC for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

The printed journal
includes an image merely
for illustration

Julie Gerberding has been director of the CDC since July, 2002

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

Corbis

Senior staff say that internal issues have not affected the agency's scientific work

between former CDC directors at George Washington University's School of Public Health on April 3.

In an interview with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* after the round-table, Satcher said: "I have been reluctant to criticise Julie", referring to Gerberding, "but I think a lot of the senior people who left were unhappy about the way it was reorganised". Many CDC scientists say that the reorganisation has made the agency more bureaucratic, adding layers that make the agency more cumbersome, and diverting attention and resources from combating diseases.

Concern about the agency's direction, and Gerberding's leadership in particular, continues to grow, according to CDC staff and results of a recent government-wide survey. Employee confidence in CDC's leadership has dropped steadily since 2002, when Gerberding became director, according to the biennial survey by the US government of all of its workers.

The 2006 Federal Human Capital Survey found just 41% of CDC workers said they had a high level of respect for the agency's senior leaders, down from 48% in 2004, the first year the question was asked. Just 46% of CDC employees in 2006 said that their managers review and evaluate the organisation's progress toward meeting its goals, down from 51% in 2004 and 66% in 2002. Only 40% of CDC employees in 2006 said the agency's leaders

maintain high standards of honesty and integrity, down from 45% in 2004. However, the survey noted that most CDC employees said they liked their individual jobs.

Gerberding's spokesman Tom Skinner said: "all our senior leaders here take the results about senior leadership to heart and take that feedback very seriously." Skinner said the agency has launched a new programme for senior leaders to take a 360-degree look at themselves and their performance.

Many factors have contributed to morale issues at CDC, Skinner and other CDC officials have said, and many of them are outside the agency's control. They include budget cuts imposed by Congress, shifts in funding priorities from combating longstanding diseases towards addressing new threats of bioterrorism, and the annoyances of various federal policies and travel and hiring systems.

Gerberding and her leadership team have vigorously denied that issues within the agency have impaired the CDC's ability to accomplish its mission. To the contrary, they say, the agency is stronger and better prepared than ever because of the changes.

They point to a slew of recent CDC activities as evidence that there has been no diminution in scientific capacity. These range from CDC's rapid identification of a contaminant in cold medications that was causing deaths in Panama to the agency's successful investigations of several recent outbreaks of food-borne illness in the USA.

CDC staff have also been responsible for cutting-edge science leading to the development of the first DNA vaccine, a vaccine against West Nile virus in horses; a new test for botulinum toxin that cuts detection time from days to hours; as well as several key breakthroughs in better understanding the H5N1 influenza virus, said Tanja Popovic, CDC's chief science officer. "The impact our science is having is bigger than ever", said

Popovic. "If anything like SARS [severe acute respiratory syndrome] happened again, everyone in the world knows who they would call: they would call us. And we would step up."

But members of Congress have not been assured by such statements and have stepped up their scrutiny of the agency in recent months. US Senator Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, has been investigating a wide range of issues at CDC for more than a year. "The American public needs to be able to count on the CDC to be able to respond in a crisis", Grassley told *The Lancet*. "Employees need to know that efforts to address low morale are not just for show. They need to know that their leaders are committed to the CDC's scientific mission", he said. "The jury's still out when it comes to answering those questions."

The world may not know the impact of this period of turmoil at CDC until the agency is faced with a major test—something of the magnitude of SARS or an influenza pandemic, said Donald Kettl, director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. Kettl published a paper in December, 2005, praising the innovation of Gerberding's reorganisation plan.

But Kettl now says he sees some troubling parallels between the turmoil and change at CDC and what happened at another US agency—the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—which performed badly after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and devastated Gulf Coast communities. CDC and FEMA both restructured in response to the terrorist attacks on Sept 11, 2001. At FEMA, as at CDC, morale was low and turnover of top employees was high. "When FEMA faced its next challenge, it performed poorly", Kettl said. "CDC's challenge is to avoid that fate. To do so will require working the bugs out of the restructuring and ensuring that, in the end, it turns out to have been the right plan."

Alison Young