

Walter Dowdle, Public Health Leader in Times of Crises, Dies at 94

Dr. Dowdle, a microbiologist who became the No. 2 official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, helped lead the nation's response to AIDS.

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By **Sheryl Gay Stolberg**

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Walter Dowdle, a microbiologist and second-in-command at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who helped lead the nation's early response to AIDS and later worked with the World Health Organization on the global effort to eradicate polio, died on Nov. 17 at his home in Hahira, in southern Georgia. He was 94.

The cause was soft tissue sarcoma, an uncommon cancer that he was diagnosed with six weeks before his death, said his daughter Jennifer Hulsey.

During 34 years with the nation's public health agency, Dr. Dowdle ran laboratories and immunization programs and eventually became principal deputy director — the Atlanta-based agency's No. 2 official and its highest-ranking civil servant. He ran the C.D.C. as acting director for nearly two years, in two separate stints, before retiring from the federal government in 1994.

“He was a quiet person,” said Dr. Anne Schuchat, who served as deputy director of the C.D.C. before retiring in 2021, “but you couldn’t be more respected within the C.D.C. scientific and public health community than he was.”

Dr. Dowdle, who grew up in a fishing village in Alabama, said his career in public health stemmed in part from seeing a childhood friend and teachers suffer from polio, which peaked as a health crisis in the 1940s and ’50s. When he joined the C.D.C. in 1960, scientists were still working to develop vaccines for childhood diseases like measles and rubella.

As a young C.D.C. virologist in 1967, Dr. Dowdle helped isolate a previously unknown strain of the herpes virus. Until that time, most scientists believed all herpes viruses were the same, no matter where they showed up on the body. Dr. Dowdle and two colleagues proved that the strain that caused cold sores was distinct from one that caused genital herpes.

It was a landmark discovery, but Dr. Dowdle recalled the effort in a 2024 interview with his signature understatement: “All in a day’s work.”

In February 1976, as head of the C.D.C.’s virology division, Dr. Dowdle was among the first federal officials to get word that a new and potentially deadly strain of swine flu was circulating among soldiers at Fort Dix, N.J.

The news spawned a nationwide mass vaccination campaign, but Dr. Dowdle was uneasy about it, he said, because the virus did not spread as fast as was initially feared. The vaccination program was canceled [that December](#) amid reports that 94 people who received the shots had developed paralysis as a result of Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare autoimmune disorder.

That same year, Dr. Dowdle’s team identified the cause of a previously unknown form of pneumonia that broke out during an [American Legion convention](#) in Philadelphia, killing 34 people and making hundreds sick; the illness became known as Legionnaire’s disease.

Years later, Dr. Dowdle oversaw research that led to [warning labels on aspirin bottles](#) after C.D.C. studies showed that children given aspirin for the flu or for chickenpox had a sharply increased risk of Reye's syndrome, a disease that can be fatal within days.

Dr. Dowdle was director of the C.D.C.'s Center for Infectious Disease when, in 1981, six months into Ronald Reagan's presidency, five gay men in Los Angeles came down with a mysterious pneumonia — the disease that would become known as AIDS. Dr. Dowdle suspected a virus was to blame.

The Reagan administration had slashed the agency's budget, he later recalled, and the C.D.C. did not have the laboratory capacity it needed to investigate, so the task of identifying the virus fell to outside researchers. Dr. Dowdle pushed for more funding, initially to no avail. Furthermore, the president refused to acknowledge the disease publicly for years. Dr. Dowdle recalled the period as “extremely difficult and discouraging.”

In 1986, Dr. Dowdle temporarily relocated to Washington to create a new federal office to coordinate the federal AIDS response. He set up shop inside the Department of Health and Human Services, the C.D.C.'s parent agency, and worked closely with Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and [C. Everett Koop](#), the U.S. surgeon general.

Dr. Dowdle cited the importance of public trust in the C.D.C. as one of the lessons he took away from that era. “One thing I learned from the whole AIDS epidemic,” he said, “was how valuable that asset is to anything that we do and anything that we'll do in the future.”



Dr. Dowdle, center, in 1976 with C.D.C. colleagues Dr. Gary Noble, left, and Dr. Alan Kendal. “Not only did he provide a standard for good science, but he demonstrated leadership and decency,” a fellow scientist said of Dr. Dowdle. United Press International

Walter Reid Dowdle was born on Dec. 11, 1930, in Irvington, Ala., and grew up in nearby Bayou La Batre. He was the second of four children of Rebecca (Powell) Dowdle, a schoolteacher, and Ruble C. Dowdle, a station agent for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.

After high school, he attended Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala., with the intent of going to medical school, he said in a [2016 oral history interview](#), but he left his studies when he ran out of money and spent four years in the Air Force medical corps, including stints in Germany as part of the 1948-'49 Berlin Airlift and in South Korea during the Korean War.

He received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in 1957 in bacteriology from the University of Alabama, and a doctorate in microbiology from the University of Maryland in 1960.

In addition to Ms. Hulsey, he is survived by his wife of 72 years, Mabel (Graham) Dowdle; two other children, Denise Rackley and Reid Dowdle; a sister, Rebecca Drew; six grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

Until 2012, when they moved to Hahira, Dr. Dowdle lived about two miles from the C.D.C.'s headquarters. Ms. Hulsey recalled that her father walked to and from work each day with a large bag to pick up trash on his way home. As a child, she thought her father was a garbage man until a classmate informed her otherwise.

After he retired from the C.D.C. in 1994, Dr. Dowdle worked for the [Task Force for Global Health](#), a nonprofit dedicated to promoting immunization, and with the World Health Organization to help establish polio laboratories in other nations that replicated efforts in the U.S. that led to the eradication of the disease.

“Not only did he provide a standard for good science, but he demonstrated leadership and decency,” said Dr. William Foege, a former C.D.C. director who helped found the task force in 1984. “He was a gift to public health.”

In 1990, Dr. Dowdle gave a lecture in which he set forth five principles that came to be known as the C.D.C.'s “pledge to the American people.” Its words, which include a promise to “base all public health decisions on the highest quality scientific data,” and to “treat all persons with dignity, honesty and respect,” were later painted in huge letters on the walls of the atrium that serves as the entrance to the agency's main building in Atlanta.

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