

Rich Besser: In 1989, I was working in Bangladesh doing research in diarrheal diseases and I learned about this program being a disease detective. And it sounded so incredibly exciting that I applied for EIS. I was answering the phone for months, and it wasn't until like right before Thanksgiving that I got the call from the Massachusetts health department that they had a problem they needed help on. They had six kids in the hospital in Boston with a condition that causes bloody diarrhea, kidney failure, can be fatal. And within 12 hours I was on a plane for Boston, working to solve this outbreak.

Ian Pray: So how did the investigation go? Do you remember?

Rich Besser: This condition is typically associated with consuming undercooked hamburger. But as I talked to these parents, what was clear was that something was different. Several of them didn't eat any ground beef but they all consumed fresh pressed apple cider from a small farm stand. It was the first confirmed outbreak of this disease from fresh pressed apple cider. And it taught me the power of epidemiology because we didn't have an idea until we did this study what was going on. Do you have an experience that really stands out for you?

Ian Pray: Yeah, I got to my station here in Wisconsin in August of 2019 and on day one I was handed what at the time was a small cluster of teenagers who were experiencing severe respiratory illnesses linked to vaping — really sick kids— but there was not a single brand that was associated with all of the cases. After 3 or 4 months of the investigation there really became overwhelming evidence that this was linked to an additive that was being used as a filler for some of these illegal vaping cartridges.

Rich Besser: I can't believe we had this similar experience but 30 years apart. One of the things that EIS did for me was give me this level of confidence that I could come into a situation where I might not know a lot and I could learn and improve health. It's been devastating to watch the vilification of public health. What has it been like for you as an EIS officer during a time when CDC has been raked through the coals at times?

Ian Pray: It's been both very inspiring to see the incredible dedication of everyone at CDC and very disheartening in some ways about the public reaction to it, and how many really important public health leaders have retired or left because just because it's too much. But you know, that's our challenge— to try to make this system better so that we can all achieve the same goal.