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Ex-CDC head recalls '76 swine flu outbreak

Story Highlights

In 1976, officials responded with vaccination that killed more people than the flu

It cost Dr. David Sencer his job as Centers for Disease Control director

Sencer says officials "believed that we were doing the right thing"

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From Abbie Boudreau and Scott Zamost
CNN Special Investigations Unit

TEXT SIZE



ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- The man who led the response to the 1976 swine flu outbreak is defending the vaccination campaign that led to more deaths than the disease, but says he's sorry for the people killed or sickened.



Dr. David Sencer says with today's knowledge, officials' 1976 recommendations would have been different.

Federal officials urged widespread vaccinations after swine flu broke out among soldiers at Fort Dix, New Jersey, killing one of the 14 diagnosed with the illness. But the program was suspended after at least 25 people died from vaccine reactions. Other estimates put the death toll at 32 people, while about 500 others later suffered from Guillain-Barre syndrome, which damages nerves and can lead to paralysis.

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But he added, "We know a lot more about viruses than we did then."

"If we were faced with what we had in 1976 today, where it was limited only to Fort Dix, we probably would not have recommended a universal vaccination until we saw spread outside of Fort Dix," he said.

In the aftermath, the government was criticized for pushing Americans to get unnecessary vaccinations. "But we also have to feel if we didn't do something and swine flu spread, more people would have died," Sencer said.

Asked about those hurt by the vaccine, he said, "If you're not sorry, you're not a human being." But he said the government paid settlements to those hurt, "So that we tried to make at least reparations in that standpoint."

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Sencer said officials were worried about a pandemic on the scale of the 1918 flu outbreak that killed an estimated 21 million people worldwide. The vaccination campaign, which featured televised ads showing how an epidemic could spread rapidly, led to 43 million people receiving flu shots.

Then-President Gerald Ford was photographed receiving his shot, and Sencer said he took the vaccine.

The pictures of Ford getting vaccinated, Sencer said, injected a measure of politics into the situation that he said the Obama administration has so far avoided in its response to the current outbreak.

"I think we tried to stay out of the politics, and the politicians kept getting in our way," he said.

This time, he said, the government has let scientists and physicians take the lead in battling the H1N1 strain that emerged in Mexico in April and has been confirmed in at least nine other countries, according to the World Health Organization.

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