

The Summer of 2006

A public health story from...

Clay County Public Health Center

How a deadly disease was stopped in its tracks

Six-year-old Charlie Smith* had talked of little else all week. He couldn't wait to slip into his swimsuit and play in Liberty's water park on Saturday, then visit his grandparents and continue the fun in their aboveground pool and in nearby Smithville Lake. But little Charlie

encountered big problems after his swimming spree that hot summer day. Nausea hit first, followed by severe diarrhea, vomiting, cramps, and fever. By Tuesday, he was in the hospital.

Charlie wasn't the only one experiencing these symptoms, according to Gary E. Zaborac, Director of Public Health of Clay County's Health Department. "A number of people started showing up in Clay County's emergency rooms and doctors' offices with vomiting, fever and severe diarrhea in the summer of 2006."

As it turned out, the diagnosis for Charlie, and eventually 110 other people, was cryptosporidiosis or "crypto." The intestinal tract disease, often contracted through microscopic parasites in drinking or recreational water and confirmed by a person's stool, causes severe diarrhea and cramping that can lead to death if left untreated.

"We had a serious outbreak on our hands," Zaborac says. "We had to prevent it from becoming a disastrous one by determining where the crypto was coming from and who had been exposed."

The health department's investigation kicked into high gear with hundreds of phone calls to families of the affected individuals—as is customary with any communicable disease outbreak—to learn the onset of each victim's symptoms and treatment to date. This led to a vital piece of the puzzle: each victim had recently visited a variety of recreational water areas, and one in particular: Liberty's water park.

Immediately, the health department shut down the water park and began an educational campaign informing pool operators, owners and the public about crypto. The water park reopened in 2007, after corrections to its water treatment system by the city made it safe again.

"The primary responsibility of any local health department is disease prevention and control," says Zaborac. "Clay County is home to over 200,000 people, and the types of diseases that affect us change yearly. This year, we've seen a significant increase in chicken pox. Five years ago, it was West Nile Virus. That's why we have to make sure our infrastructure is in place, so that we are ready for the next emerging disease. We never know when it will strike."

**(The case described is real, but the name has been changed).*

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