



Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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Veterinary alum receives national public health award

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Lt. Cmdr. Danielle Buttke, DVM('09)/PhD ('10) received the 2014 James H. Steele Veterinary Public Health Award from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in April at the 63rd annual Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) Conference.

The award is named for the first chief of the CDC's Veterinary Public Health Division. It is given to a current or former EIS officer who has made outstanding contributions in the field of veterinary public health. This award recognizes Buttke's outstanding contributions in the investigation, control, and prevention of zoonotic diseases and other animal-related human health problems.



"Danielle is one of the brightest students I've met in recent years," said Dr. Alfonso Torres, associate dean for public policy at the College of Veterinary Medicine. "She was a talented researcher but wanted to do applied public health on the ground. She was very determined to develop this career path. She is a great example of the one health concept, integrating wildlife, human diseases, animal health, lab research, and fieldwork into her career."

Buttke's talent for veterinary and public health showed early and strongly. She earned three degrees concurrently: a DVM and PhD from Cornell's Dual Degree program in veterinary medicine and comparative biomedical sciences, and an MPH in global environmental health from Johns Hopkins University.

In 2010 she joined the EIS offered through the CDC, a two-year post-graduate training program of service and on-the-job learning for health professionals interested in the practice of applied epidemiology. As part of her service she investigated a strange new illness spreading throughout Tigray, the northern region of Ethiopia. In this dry, mountainous area, people living in remote homes and villages were coming down with what appeared to be the same unknown disease. Residents of Tigray were all too familiar with the tropical diseases common in this region, and they recognized this illness was not one of them.

People who contracted the disease developed swollen, painful abdomens and then lost weight. Some of them had trouble breathing as the fluid in their abdomens crowded against their lungs. Three or four family members in one household might become ill, while others living in the same household did not. However, in some families, everyone died from the disease. Buttke proved instrumental in dispelling the notion that it was an infectious disease, proving the symptoms were in fact due to intoxication from eating raw livers of sheep that had eaten a toxic plant.

In her current role as the one-health coordinator for the National Park Service (NPS), Buttke proved crucial to solving another deadly public health mystery. In 2012, several visitors at Yosemite National Park contracted what was eventually recognized as hantavirus, a potentially fatal virus transmitted by mouse droppings. Three people died. Buttke was able to help trace the outbreak to a single campsite, where she found tents infested with infected mice.

“When you pulled back that canvas, you could see there were mice living in the void space between the walls,” Buttke says. “They were nesting in the insulation.”

The tents were destroyed and precautions were taken to prevent future infestations. Buttke continues to work for the NPS as one of two epidemiologists responding to urgent and emergent public health issues in over 400 National Park units hosting nearly 280 million visitors annually.

"I love working for the National Park Service because there is such an incredible sense of morale," said Buttke in an [online piece](#) on her NPS work. "People care so much about their jobs and what we do is very important. I take a tremendous sense of pride in feeling that what I am doing is helping to preserve and protect not just the health of visitors but also the resources in these parks, and it really is such a tremendous resource and unbelievable opportunity to work to preserve the nation's parks."