Chronicles of a feisty public health veterinarian



Dr. Oscar Sussman

Back in 1932, I decided to become a veterinarian when my dog was shot in front of my home in New York. A well-meaning neighbor and the policeman on the beat thought my dog was rabid. No examination, no waiting period, just a fast draw of the policeman's revolver and a shot in the head. That was it! I realized at that moment how much I loved animals. That was a turning point in my life. I wanted to become a veterinarian.

I did my pre-veterinary work at Iowa State, and then went on to Michigan State Veterinary College. I was lucky and was given a part-time position as a student assistant in Dr.Claude Bryan's microbiology section. Dr. Bryan was working with brucellosis. He used to take his students with him when he went out in the field to collect blood samples. One of my most memorable field trips was to Carl Sandburg's farm, where his daughter and Swedish housekeeper were taking care of about 45 goats. They would call out the name of each goat, and it would jump up on the milking stand. It was sensational. We were invited to dinner by Mr. Sandburg Dinner consisted of roast kid, goat milk, goat butter, goat cheese, and goat custard dessert made by Sandburg's housekeeper. For college students, living on about $3.50 a week during the depression, you can understand, besides having the opportunity to speak with Carl Sandburg, what it meant to us to have such an unusual dinner.

Receiving my DVM degree in June 1940, I was sent to Puerto Rico by the USDA to test cattle for tuberculosis and brucellosis, and in the process, learned to speak Spanish fluently. While there, I began to understand something about mosquitoes and various other vectors of tropical diseases firsthand. I contracted malaria and dengue, or breakbone fever, well named. It was my first real contact with epidemiology, which eventually became my primary work.

Shortly after the United States entered World War II, I enlisted in the army as a private and then applied for a commission. The second lieutenant who was in charge of our medical training unit came to me one day, saluted, and said,"First Lieutenant Sussman, here are your orders." That was the first time I realized that being a veterinarian gave one a preferred status in life.

My initial army assignment was a training unit for medical officers at Camp Blackstone, Va. It was made up mostly of physicians and dentists. I was a young, 25-year-old, healthy veterinarian. The rest of them were much older, sedentary, and getting larger girths than were good for them. One day we were told we were going to march with backpacks, including gas masks, to Camp Picket, about 20 miles from where we were at the time. That did not sound so bad, but about three miles on the way, they ran a vehicle by us and shouted "gas attack" while they pumped out tear gas. Donning our masks, we were then double-timed out of the area. We lost one physician and one dentist to heart attacks. This was a sobering incident.

Finishing that course, I was sent to the Navy Yard at Brooklyn, NY, where veterinarians were trained to inspect milk, cheese, and other foods to protect our troops from foodborne illnesses. Imagine my odyssey—Iowa, Michigan, Puerto Rico, and home, to my original state and city of New York. I completed the course and was transferred to the First Air Force, at Mitchell Field, NY, and eventually to Do-

ver Army Air Base in Delaware, where I became a flying veterinarian! We had guard dogs stationed along the coast at secret radar stations. Aside from my normal duties as base public health officer, I was called on to fly to the secret radar stations whenever the dogs needed medical attention. One of my duties, other than the guard dog assignments, was to supervise the purchase of the army's seafood, particularly oysters and clams. I loved oysters and clams.

I was later transferred to Camp Springs Army Air Base, then just a dusty little airfield in Maryland where P38 pilots were trained. I remained there for about nine months doing public health work, including food inspection and sanitation. I met my future wife Jane, an ensign in the navy, at an Officer's Club dance in Washington, DC, in February 1944. We were married in November 1944. By then, I was transferred to Godman Army Air Base, Fort Knox, Ky. After four months I was transferred again to Seymour, Ind, for just five days and then was sent to the Sixth Army in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

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When I arrived in Manila, the war was still going on. Eight of us were sleeping in a large pyramidal tent. We were shelled on a rather continuous basis, and learned to sleep through it. The morning of my fourth day, I awakened and found that one of my tentmates was dead from shrapnel wounds—a very frightening experience.

Subsequently, I was flown to Finchaven, New Guinea, to take over the 102nd Veterinary Unit. The Finchaven area had troops prepared to launch an invasion of Japan itself. There were many Japanese surrounding our peninsula. Every day, we would have little skirmishes while performing our daily duties. Veterinarians were expected to carry weapons, as the Geneva Convention did not apply to us. Fortunately, I never had to use my pistol, nor was I shot.

One day, a colonel complained that he would not allow his troops to use the flour issued because of bugs in it. He ordered the quartermaster to dump hundreds of pounds of weevily flour. The quartermaster knew we would have no bread, and consulted me about the matter. Knowing that weevils did nothing more than add protein to the diet, I wrote a relief letter to the quartermaster, telling him to issue raisins to the bakers, suggesting we have raisin bread until the weevily flour was used up. I did not get an award, but from then on my unit could do no wrong in the eyes of the quartermaster, and we got whatever supplies we wanted from the depot.

After a few months, the 102nd Veterinary Unit received orders to embark for the Philippines. I received two sets of secret orders. One set ordered me to report to an admiral on a move called "Olympic," and the other to a major general on a move called "Comet." Understandably, not knowing which was the more dangerous and not wishing to subject my men and myself to the most dangerous move, I was deliberating about which one I should report to. Fortunately the war ended, and all orders were rescinded.

I landed in Wakayama, Japan, in September 1945. Our unit was on the beach, and there was a hill rising up ahead. We did not know what was going to happen, for at the top was a long line of Japanese coming toward us. We all got at the ready, with our weapons poised. It turned out all they wanted to do was set up our tents and get some of our chocolates, salt, and other provisions. After several months of food inspection and epidemiology in Japan, I was rotated home as a major in April 1946. I reported to the USDA and was given the same grade and position I had held before the war. The veterinarians who had remained civilians with the USDA were up several grades. It seemed grossly unfair to us veterans on our return from war duty.

I had become intrigued with the public health work that I carried out in the army and, not wanting to stay in cattle testing, nor meat inspection, I enrolled at Yale University's School of Medicine. In June 1947, I received my Master of Public Health degree, and joined the US Public Health Service as a field epidemiologist in Arizona, dealing with beef tapeworm, brucellosis, and tuberculosis prevention in human beings. I worked on "Q fever," and felt pretty good when my first article was published in *Public Health Reports* in 1949, "Infection of the Brown Dog

Tick, *Rhipicephalus sanguineus*, with *Coxiella burnetti*."

In 1949, I accepted a position with the New Jersey State Department of Health as public health veterinarian. I retired as director of Consumer Health Services after serving the people of New Jersey for 30 years.

From 1950 to 1956, I attended Seton Hall University School of Law at night, finally receiving my JD degree in 1956. It was a bit hard. Most of my studying was done on the train from Trenton to Newark and return. My law degree, however, was a big help in many of the problems I encountered in Public Health, which had legal implications.

An article written by Allan F. Yoder (Oct 9, 1975) for *The (Bergen) Record* of northern New Jersey, effectively sums up a portion of my career with the state of New Jersey, and my beginnings with the US Public Health Service in Arizona. Yoder said of me (reproduced with permission of *The [Bergen] Record*, Hackensack, NJ):

. . . In the Statehouse, he is visible from a distance: a small bald man, round as a barrel, wearing knee socks, bermuda shorts, and one of the 60 clip-on bow ties for which he is famous.

He is a tight fist of a man, a civil servant perpetually outraged by the state government for which he works and ever willing to spill the beans about the excesses and shortcomings of that government.

His name is Dr. Oscar Sussman, a veterinary doctor with a law degree from Seton Hall University. . .and the state's top health inspector. He is the man who spurred a revolution in sanitary standards when he brought the roaches and rat feces of a thousand New Jersey eating establishments onto the front pages by leaking a secret report on filthy restaurants to the press.

And he ignited a mini-revolution within state government when he ignored the wishes of his superiors—including Governor William T. Cahill and Atty. Gen. George F. Kugler—and led his corps of inspectors into the kitchens of state prisons, mental health hospitals, and nursing homes, ordering two closed until they were cleaned.

Gov. Byrne is Sussman's latest target. The governor raised Sussman's ire when an elite group of his friends formed themselves into the Woodrow Wilson Society, charging annual dues of $500 apiece to raise money for Byrne's unofficial travel expenses. Harking back to his campaign against dirty kitchens, Sussman founded and then named himself president of Retch, Roach, and Rat, a Walking and Talking Together Society. He uses the society today to take potshots at Byrne and the rest of state government.

The jibes at Byrne, however, are less pointed than in past campaigns. That may be that Sussman is toying with the idea of running for governor in 1977.

Reaching across his cluttered desk Sussman proudly pulls a sample bumper sticker from an overflowing pile of papers. "Give yourself an Oscar," the bumper sticker says, "Elect Sussman Governor."

"I'm not stupid," the 58-year-old Sussman says. "I wouldn't run for governor just for the glory. But if there is a need for an independent candidate to raise the right issues in the governor's race—issues that consumers care about—then I'd run whether I had a viable chance or not. I would run to show the Republican and Democratic candidates that they make a mockery of the political process."

Sussman admits after a few hours' conversation that he really doesn't think of himself as a politician. To be honest, he confides, "I really don't want or expect to be governor. . . ." He says he would be content to spend a few more years as Director of Consumer Health Services. . . .

Sussman's political plans have been fueled by an outpouring of support from fellow bureaucrats and friends who think he'd be a good governor. More than a few New Jersey newspaper editorialists have written about him as the brightest light in state government. . . .

"I get letters from the aged people in nursing homes who think I'm a compassionate sort. A lot of people are encouraging me," Sussman says.

"I've been accused of being a headline hunter, and I am. But I don't do it for personal publicity—just to get some attention paid to some of the things that I think are awful. . . .I'm aware that some people think I do things to be silly or to be mean or spiteful or to make a name for myself. But that's not true. I create controversy because I know that unless you create a focal point nobody pays any attention; I do what I do to point out the inequities."

Seeking out press support has been Sussman's modus operandi for thirty

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years. He tells a story of his first brush with controversy, when he was a young US Public Health Service Officer working the cattle fields of the American Southwest shortly after World War II.

The young veterinarian had been testing cattle for disease and he noted that large numbers of cows were infected with an organism that led to undulant fever in those who drank the cows' milk raw. "These cows," Sussman says, his anger rising as he recalls the story, "instead of being sent off to slaughter, the ranchers were selling them to poor Mexican-American families and hundreds of kids got undulant fever."

He says he couldn't get the [Arizona] government to halt the sale of infected cows until he turned his information over to a reporter for the Arizona Republic. *"I'd gone through all the proper bureaucratic channels but nothing happened until I went to the papers." The same pattern has repeated itself during Sussman's years in NJ.*

The incident that brought Sussman fame, however, didn't unfold until a few years ago, when Sussman leaked a secret report to the newspapers showing that a huge number of New Jersey food establishments failed to meet the health code. The problem? An overdose of cockroaches, rats, and mice droppings, layer upon layer of dried grease, improperly refrigerated food. "On and on until it's enough to make you retch," Sussman said.

That wasn't the end of Sussman's battle with bugs. A few months after the campaign to clean up restaurant kitchens Sussman received an impassioned letter from a woman whose daughter was confined to the state psychiatric hospital in Trenton. It seems the woman had been feeding her daughter when a roach crawled off the food tray and onto her arm.

Responding in his typical no-holds-barred fashion, Sussman ordered his health inspectors into the kitchens of hospitals and other state institutions. When they found the expected deplorable mess, Sussman ordered the kitchens closed at Trenton State Prison, and at the NJ Home for Disabled Soldiers.

When he recalls the incident, he chortles, "All hell broke loose." His superiors in the Department of Health argued that no matter what the condition of the kitchens, the inmates and old people had to be fed.

In no time at all, as Sussman continued his daily barrage against filth, his former boss, then health commissioner, James Cowan, issued a memorandum forbidding any employee to speak to reporters without the commissioner's express written approval. "He tried to gag me," Sussman says, "but I went to court claiming abridgement of my First and Fourteenth Amendment rights."

A three-judge federal court in Trenton ultimately ruled in Sussman's favor, and today he needs no one's permission to walk down the press corridor and harangue the reporters of his latest mission.

"This all sounds so corny," Sussman says," but it really does bother me that the public thinks government is always working to protect the people, and it's so often nothing more than a sham, a fraud."

So ends Yoder's article about me.

In another vein, working as an epidemiologist, one day I was asked to look into the possibility that a parakeet owned by Dr. Albert Einstein might have psittacosis. It tested positive. Using a new antibiotic, I had to inject the bird intramuscularly a number of times. After the first week, Dr. Einstein offered me a glass of wine, cookies, and the opportunity to answer some questions for him. He probed me for an hour. When I saw him 10 days later, he told me more about the disease than I had told him. He was brilliant!

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With regard to psittacosis in New Jersey in 1953 to 1955, a number of establishments, selling parakeets and other larger psittacine birds, were illegally importing infected birds and spreading the disease to other birds and to human beings. There was a time when New Jersey quarantined a number of establishments until the birds could be checked out and treated.

My men and I were working night and day as well as weekends drawing blood from the birds and checking the blood to get psittacosis under control. Late one afternoon of a week when all three of our children were in bed with the flu, and I was working long hours on the psittacosis problem, my wife received a threatening telephone call from a man whose birds were under quarantine. He said to her, "You tell your husband he better lift the quarantine on my birds or something just may happen to you." Those were dark days for both of us.

While in New Jersey, my field research resulted in finding that bats were infected with rabies, a new finding in that area. For a time, New Jersey had been free of rabies. I also did a considerable amount of field research with Richard E. Shope, MD, of the Rockefeller Institute. My family became quite accustomed to the birds, worms, and other animals I kept in our refrigerator until I turned them over to Dr. Shope. Dr. Shope was later given an honorary degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine for his work helping animals as well as human beings.

Unfortunately, between 1959 and 1960, New Jersey became well known for eastern equine encephalitis in human beings living or vacationing on the South Jersey Shore. It resulted in a public health and economic problem as people started avoiding the South Jersey Shore, which depended a great deal on the tourist trade.

The unit I was in charge of tackled the task of finding out the means of disease transmission. Drs. Ray Kerlin, William Carter, and I learned how to mist net passerine birds, identify them, draw blood, and band these tiny creatures. We recaptured them for the five years that our study went on. These blood samples were checked for antibodies so we could assess when they had become infected. We also checked human beings, horses, and other animals during that time to try to find out which ones could have enough virus to pass on to others via vectors. This involved working with entomologists, such as Walter Gusciora in our unit, who caught mosquitoes and verified the presence of virus and the animal or avian blood meals they had eaten prior to capture. The late Dr. Preston Holden worked in our unit, being loaned to us by the USPHS. He did a remarkable job.

New Jersey's Secaucus area was well known for the feeding of raw garbage from New York City to hogs. Secaucus was also well known for the smells and the diseases the hogs became infected with, especially vesicular exanthema, cholera, and trichinosis, because of the raw pork found in the garbage. Some people thought that hogs never ate rats. That was not true. Rats were abundant in the feeding areas. I saw hogs stomping on them when they fought to get at the food. In some instances, the farmers would hold the hogs back until the black carpet of rats had come in to get their share. Once the hogs were allowed in, the rats would be squashed under foot. Hogs would avoid the skins with fur but relished the entrails. There came a time when it was necessary for the state of New Jersey to require the garbage to be cooked before feeding it to the hogs. Eventually the hog farms of Secaucus were removed to rural South Jersey. This made traveling the NJ Turnpike to and from New York City a more pleasant experience, for moving the farms removed many of the unpleasant odors.

While in the state department of health, I was in constant touch with humane societies regarding the use of animals for research. I debated Cleveland Amory on television about the subject and pointed out to him that a good deal of the scientific studies aided animals as well as human beings. Remarks from the public afterward indicated I won.

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In 1962 the US State Department invited me to accept a Fulbright Professorship with an assignment at the High Institute of Public Health, Alexandria, Egypt. I was to help in an evaluation of the epidemiologic and preventive activities of their health services. I was given permission by then governor of New Jersey, Robert Meyner, for a leave of absence to accept. My wife and our three children joined me. Egypt was a memorable experience for all of us. My work was interesting and productive. It amazed me that there was a kosher slaughterhouse still active in Alexandria and took my students there on a field trip.

In 1966, I served as a consultant to the World Health Organization in Brazil. I taught epidemiology and public health at the veterinary school in Belo Horizonte. Jane and I were surprised that most of the people we met in Egypt also spoke English. In Brazil, few people spoke anything but Portuguese, and my knowledge of Spanish did not help me a bit. While returning from Brazil we decided to travel to the Panama Canal Zone. Dr. Robert Matheny, the Canal public health veterinarian, arranged for us to stay at the Tivoli Guest House. It was like going back 50 years in time to see this wonderful place which had been built in

Teddy Roosevelt's days. The whole area was beautiful. As we enjoyed seeing the locks in operation, it was easy to see, however, the difficulties that had to be overcome to build the Canal.

In 1974, I served WHO once again. This time I was sent to Calcutta, India. I was, of course, quite pleased that my veterinary degree had been instrumental in my follow-up work in public health, food inspection, and epidemiology.

Just prior to my retirement from the state of New Jersey, a reporter from the *Newark Star Ledger* called, and my wife answered the phone. She stated to him that he probably wanted to speak to me. He said, "No, I want to ask you how your husband's work has affected your children." She laughed heartily and answered that they did not eat egg salad, chicken salad, tuna salad, nor potato salad when they went out to eat, since they had heard me, any number of times, on the phone explaining to people in charge of church suppers and picnics how bacteria grew in salads when improperly refrigerated or put into containers too large for the contents to become cold through and through and how this had made people at their suppers or picnics very sick.

My veterinary public health unit grew to become the Consumer Health Services Unit of the Department, with about 150 persons reporting to it. I would never have been able to handle it as efficiently as I did had it not been for my assistant, Dr. Warren Rednor, and my personal secretary, Mrs. Rose O'Gorman, who could find anything on my cluttered desk. I was great on the big overall planning, and Dr. Rednor was great with the little details. We made a good team.

As I reflect further, there was a situation in the Public Health Service called "Tub Thumping" by a person called "Big Jim," Dr. James H. Steele, an assistant surgeon general. Tub thumping meant to promote veterinary public health, and he surely could thump. I thank him for his confidence in me, though he criticized me from time to time about wearing a frayed bow tie.

Dr. Sussman has been a fellow of the American Public Health Association (1949); vice president of the AVMA (1956); New Jersey delegate in the AVMA House of Delegates (1952-1959); president of the New Jersey VMA (1958); president of the Conference of Public Health Veterinarians (1965); president of the New Jersey Public Health Association (1969); recipient of the Karl F. Meyer Gold Headed Cane Award (1969); president of the Professional Health Officers Society of New Jersey (1981); member of the Florida Bar Association, and diplomate of the American College of Epidemiology (1981).

Now that he is retired, he sculpts in welded steel and stone, and does abstract watercolors. He currently resides in Chapel Hill, NC with his wife, Jane. They have been married 50 years. Jane has never ceased to be amused that, over the years, when she has met colleagues of Oscar's for the first time, they invariably have asked, "How do you live with that guy?"

Retired veterinarians are encouraged to contribute to this feature. Dissertations should be concise. Contributions should focus primarily on noteworthy professional experiences and observations. Persons interested in contributing should contact the editor-in-chief for details.