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BEATING BACK THE DEVIL:
On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives
of the Epidemic Intelligence Service
By Maryn McKenna

“Even people who think they know about the CDC and its elite corps of physicians, the Epidemic Intelligence Service, will be surprised by *Beating Back the Devil*, a **rare inside account of how EIS works in an age of terrorist threat**. McKenna hopscotches the globe, from a malaria outbreak in Malawi to SARS in Vietnam, to **bring to life some of the most compelling mysteries confronted by these fearless disease detectives**.” — Robin Marantz Henig, author of *A Dancing Matrix*

“Maryn McKenna was so close to the first group of E.I.S. officers trained after 9/11 that she could practically smell the adrenaline rush they got from being on call in case bioterrorism or a deadly disease struck anywhere on the globe. **In McKenna’s hands, outbreak investigations read as richly textured mysteries worthy of P.D. James**.” — Patricia Thomas, author of *Big Shot*

If the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the Pentagon of public health in America — the place where threats are identified and control strategies are launched — then the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) is its Special Forces. In the 53 years since the corps was founded, its members have been the first on the scene of outbreaks of AIDS, Ebola, hantavirus, and, most recently, monkeypox and SARS. And they will be at the next outbreak, whenever and wherever it may occur.

In *BEATING BACK THE DEVIL: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service* (Free Press; publication date: September 13, 2004; \$26.00), award-winning science and medical writer Maryn McKenna — the first journalist ever given full access to the EIS — gives readers an inside look at the little-known corps that has fought to protect the world from every emerging disease and bioterror threat of the last half-century.

The EIS is a rapid-reaction force, founded out of Korean War fears of biological weapons. Fighting a war against diseases, the EIS’s “disease detectives” are prepared to travel to the far reaches of the globe, often with only a few hours’ notice and not knowing what they’ll find once they get there. Until 2001, they had performed their jobs in anonymity. But that fall they became the backbone of the federal response to

the World Trade Center attacks and the anthrax crisis. Their work was suddenly visible, not just to a few citizens dealing with an isolated outbreak, but to the entire country at once.

In fast-moving, riveting chapters, McKenna juxtaposes the history of the EIS and some of the health threats EIS officers have encountered — including polio, smallpox, and AIDS — with details of the group's recent forays against the 2001 anthrax attacks and last year's SARS epidemic. Drawing on first-hand interviews with many of the EIS officers who were at the forefront of these investigations, diaries, medical journal articles, and CDC records, McKenna brings readers face to face with the dangers epidemiologists encountered as they worked to isolate and contain outbreaks. Describing what happened in each case, as well as how and why, she also profiles the heroes responsible for much of our knowledge about infectious diseases today, including Wayne X. Shandera, a young EIS officer stationed in Los Angeles who reported the first cases of AIDS; Don Sharp, who traveled to Zaire in 1994 to help control the spread of cholera among Rwandan refugees, where he witnessed horrific violence and was told there were too many doctors there already; and Martha Iwamoto, who was among the EIS investigators to locate and isolate the blood from a donor that had been infected with West Nile virus, the first time on record that the virus had been passed from person to person.

Taking readers further inside the EIS, McKenna also details a year in the life of the EIS class of 2002, the first to enter the force after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the first trained under the assumption that there will be another terrorist attack of some kind that the EIS will need to respond to. They are a talented group of young doctors, Ph.D.s, veterinarians, and nurses, many with young families, and McKenna is with them as they endure weeks of intensive schooling in recognizing natural outbreaks of disease, then spend another week learning about the possible forms a terrorist attack could take. She shadows them through routine work and emergency investigations at CDC headquarters in Atlanta and in several states, Africa, and Southeast Asia. She is with them as they don protective suits for the first time in a poison-gas attack simulation, and then again months later when they reassembled in their dress uniforms for their basic officer training course. In their two years in the force, the members of the EIS endure low pay and extremely long hours. They are challenged to the limits of their training and their physical stamina. They come face to face with diseases they never studied, tragedies they could never have prepared for, and situations that potentially threaten their own health and lives.

Unprecedented, harrowing, and truly inspiring, *BEATING BACK THE DEVIL* brings the hidden world of the Epidemic Intelligence Service's disease detectives to light for the first time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maryn McKenna is an award-winning science and medical writer at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where she has covered the CDC since 1997. She is a graduate of Georgetown University and the Medill School of Journalism of Northwestern University, and has also studied at Harvard Medical School. In 1998-1999 she was the Knight Fellow in Medicine at the University of Michigan's Schools of Medicine and Public Health. She lives in Atlanta. For more information about the author and this title visit: <http://www.authorsontheweb.com/authors/McKenna-Maryn/>

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