Profile

CDC's Thomas Frieden—protecting health and reducing costs

When Michael Bloomberg was elected Mayor of New York in 2001, he started looking to appoint a new Health Commissioner. The dust from the Sept 11 attacks had barely settled, so when asked which public health issue would require the most Mayoral support, many of the job candidates answered, bioterrorism. Thomas Frieden said, tobacco. He got the job, and after almost 8 years serving as the New York City Health Commissioner, Frieden was, last year, appointed to the US top spot for public health. Barack Obama named him as the 16th Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"President Obama could not have selected a better person to lead the CDC", says Bloomberg, adding, "The innovative initiatives he launched here in New York City have had a profound effect not only on New Yorkers, but—as his ideas spread—on people around the world." Those initiatives included regulations to eliminate transfats from restaurants and require calorie information to be posted prominently at chain restaurants, and, most notably, banning smoking in the work place, raising tobacco tax, and running hard-hitting anti-tobacco advertisements. The smoking ban drew criticisms of being overly nannying. But, Frieden says proudly, "There are now 350 000 fewer smokers in NYC." Prevalence of adult smoking dropped by 25% and teen smoking by 52% in just 6 years, he adds. Nannied or not, New Yorkers are healthier.

Frieden, who grew up in New York, says he first became interested in public health after a conversation with his father while the two were hiking. His father, also a doctor, commented that since Frieden seemed to like both science and politics, public health might be a good career option. Another push came from Frieden's own desire to help larger numbers of people. "Clinical care is needed; public health can improve the health of entire communities", he explains. So, after finishing his medical studies and residency at Columbia University, New York, he gained a Masters degree in public health, trained in infectious diseases at Yale School of Medicine, and then joined the CDC as an Officer in the Epidemiologic Intelligence Service.

It was 1990 and New York was facing an epidemic of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. Frieden was tasked with tackling it. "We were in the midst of a very large outbreak, the number of cases had tripled, drug resistance had become common, patients and medical residents were avoiding New York City hospitals because of the fear of infection and the general sense was that it really wasn't going to be controllable." But it was. The keys to success, says Frieden, were keeping data on all of the patients and holding all staff accountable for curing the patients. "We said, we're a team and we're going to get people cured", Frieden recalls.

As more people were cured, the infection rate plummeted. "We had an 80% reduction in multidrug-resistant cases, and a very substantial reduction in cases overall." The success of this tuberculosis control programme led to a posting in India. Still working for the CDC but on loan to WHO, Frieden moved with his family to Delhi in 1996. Over the next 5 years, Frieden helped to control tuberculosis there too. To date, he says, "More than a million lives have been saved."

Frieden had no plans to return to New York. "We had sold our home", he says, "and I remember saying to my wife, the only reason we would ever move back there is if I became Health Commissioner, and there's no way that will ever happen." Then, one day in late 2001, he received a phone call from Alfred Sommer (the then Dean of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore) on behalf of Bloomberg. After discovering that Frieden placed tobacco as his priority public health issue, Sommer suggested that Frieden might at least mention bioterrorism in his up-coming formal interview. "I said, Tom, you did hear of 9/11 didn't you?" recalls Sommer. "Tom responded that of course it was essential to prepare and respond to possible emergencies, 'But we know that tobacco will kill thousands of New Yorkers this year'." Tobacco is still high on Frieden's agenda. It dominates as a preventable cause of death, he says, and prevention is a priority of Obama's health-care reform—not least because it brings down costs. "In our response to 9/11 and other emergencies, public health moved guickly and improved systems to detect and respond to future emergencies. We need that kind of focus and energy to address the leading causes of illness, injury, disability, and death. Prevention is on the map as it has never been before—it's all about using information and proven interventions to improve health."

Frieden's focus is not just on the USA. "CDC has a global mandate and an important role supporting country partners, ministries of health, WHO, and other organisations to control communicable and non-communicable diseases. One of CDC's most important roles is to help improve information available to people in developing countries about major health problems and how they can be addressed", he explains. As for his key domestic responsibilities, Frieden has set out six "Winnable Battles" for the CDC: tobacco control, infections associated with health care, HIV prevention, motor vehicle injuries, nutrition and food safety, and teen pregnancy. But why make this hotlist? Because, Frieden explains, "I asked, 'How can we save the most lives and the most money?' and then looked to the data to provide the answer."





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