

# practicing public health in the private sector



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**F**uture advances in public health will come not only from new clinical research but, increasingly, from the creation and application of population-based prevention programs, initiatives and partnerships. While many of these are the work of public health organizations and associations, the private sector is making a significant contribution. It is to this area that my personal journey in public health has led, and I find it dynamic, challenging and rewarding.

The pharmaceutical industry, and Pfizer in particular, are responsible for some very noteworthy private sector programs and partnerships currently underway. While Pfizer is best known to health professionals for discovering, developing and manufacturing pharmaceuticals for use by individual patients, the company is also committed to improving the health of populations. Because a population is more than the sum of its individuals, that commitment is accomplished by addressing community as well as patient issues.



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Through the implementation of programs created by public health professionals within Pfizer, and through our relationships with thought leaders, public agencies and community organizations, we work to leverage our company's assets to improve the public's health. Since I benefit from dual perspectives — having worked in both the public and private sectors — I can see firsthand how important and effective these initiatives are.

Before coming to Pfizer, I worked for many years in government, having served as Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health and as Commissioner of Health for the State of New York under Governor George Pataki. I also held an executive position at New York-Presbyterian Healthcare Network and an appointment as a professor of medicine. The reason I decided four years ago to go into the private sector is perhaps no different than that which led many people down the same path: it provided me with a new opportunity to work on solving some of the most important issues connected to health care from a whole different angle. The bonus is that I am able to do this with a successful company's commitment and resources behind me.

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As senior medical director of public health, I serve the company both externally and internally. Among the most important external aspects of my job is to build relationships with public health thought leaders and to create and manage non-product-related programs for the public health community. For example, I have led a comprehensive Pfizer initiative in health literacy, a vital component for successful health care delivery. The Pfizer Health Literacy Initiative (PHLI) operates to ensure that patients have a clear understanding of their illness so they may make effective health care choices. A health-literate patient understands how to manage his or her illness, how to follow directions about diet and medication compliance, how to read a consent form and how to effectively communicate with physicians. Because we do not consider improving low health literacy solely the duty of the patient, PHLI recognizes that health care professionals, too, play a key role in this initiative. As a company, we are interested in identifying methods to help improve health literacy, and in evaluating the impact of those tools.

To further develop this program, Pfizer sponsors four types of grants. Health Literacy Research grants are available to health care professionals and postgraduate investigators to develop two-year health literacy studies. Health Literacy Scholar awards are granted to professionals with doctorates (e.g. PhD, PharmD, EdD, MD) who undertake a health literacy research project. Visiting Lecturer grants are given to organizations to create a one-day lecture agenda suitable for a recognized health literacy expert. Health Literacy Community grants are provided to nonprofit organizations (e.g. community health centers, some hospitals) to produce community-based programs designed to increase health literacy in underserved populations. Our public health group also oversees a comprehensive health literacy study in 28 community health centers in Florida as part of Pfizer's Healthy State Initiative that is with the state's Medicaid program.

In addition to running its own grants and programs, Pfizer works in alliance with select public health associations and schools. We partner with organizations such as the American Public Health Association (APHA), the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM), the National Association of City and County Health Officers (NACCHO) and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) to improve the public health care community and to support prevention and public policy development. Additionally, we are embarking on a program with the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC) to help attract physicians-in-training to the field of epidemiology by providing them access to CDC and state-based experience. Our partnership programs with various academic medical institutions encourage scholars to train in both infectious disease and clinical epidemiology.

The opportunities for someone in a position such as mine do not stop with programs and partnerships. When major national issues arise, I am there to act upon them. For example, one of my greatest challenges so far has resulted from the consequences of September 11, 2001, and the autumn anthrax attack.



Because of my public health experience, I was designated the company's point person for these matters. We had to address such questions as: What should our company-wide response to bioterrorism be? Who are the right people on the outside to advise and help us? Did the CDC need us to produce more doxycycline for the pharmaceutical stockpile program? Did the Department of Defense (DoD), CDC or Food and Drug Administration (FDA) need our labs and/or manufacturing plants to increase product production?

Beyond my external activities, I play an internal role at Pfizer as well. In the case of the 9/11 disasters, my role has been to inform and educate employees about the issues and to keep them apprised of federal activities under way. Using my background in infectious diseases, medicine and epidemiology, I am able to address employee concerns. I continually assess our company's level of risk as a multinational corporation, no small task considering our headquarter offices are located between two high-profile structures, the United Nations and Grand Central Station.

This is an exciting time to be in public health and to be working within the private sector. I have an exceptional opportunity to transform the culture of an organization in the way it thinks about public health or in other words, to move towards a population focus. Although Pfizer is my home, practicing public health in any corporate setting is a wonderful opportunity to use

your degree, your background and your public health experience to create change and add value to the public health community and to your company. Finding the right programs and the right strategic alliances that respond positively to both your business and to public health issues is a win-win proposition. And if the past is prologue, the bridges to be built between the private and public sectors will be increasingly important to the future of healthy populations.

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