

Tom Frieden, bold pioneer of US public health

As the US continues to debate health reforms, Tom Frieden, head of the CDC, tells **Karen McColl** that prevention must be the priority



Health could hardly have been higher on the US agenda when Tom Frieden started his job as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Swine flu, healthcare reform, and the federal stimulus package were just three of the issues in his in-tray on his first day on 8 June. The high profile of each of these issues, he says, has been “enough to have kept it a very interesting time.”

Although responsibility for health policy largely rests with individual states, and federal laws are decided in Washington, the CDC has a vital role in facilitating federal, state, and local action. The remit of the Atlanta based agency—with an overall budget of \$10.1bn (£6.3bn; €7.1bn) and a staff of over 14 000—covers health promotion, disease prevention, and preparation for new health threats. CDC is also an important player in global health.

Although Frieden was nominated by President Obama, the appointment did not have to go through the highly political process of senate confirmation. Nonetheless, as former health commissioner for New York, Frieden is well known for his willingness to use the law to control health risks, and placing him

at the head of the country’s main public health agency sends a clear signal that the administration intends to take a strong line on health protection.

Need for change

Frieden is openly critical of the current public health infrastructure, which he says “has suffered from decades of neglect.” He also criticises a “healthcare infrastructure that is poorly coordinated, has poor information management, and does not focus on prevention.” He sees it as an important priority for CDC to try to ensure that whatever healthcare system emerges from the current reform process is oriented towards improving prevention.

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statement may be part of his response to the agency’s alleged morale problems. The CDC has been dogged by widespread reports of an unhappy workforce since a major organisational restructure was launched in 2003, although recent reports suggest that employee satisfaction has begun to improve.¹

The first thing that Frieden says when I ask him about these initial busy months is that he has been enormously encouraged by the quality of staff at CDC. This emphatic

Pioneering

Frieden qualified as a doctor at Columbia University and went on to get further training in public health, internal medicine, and infectious diseases. In New York in the 1990s, with the city’s then health commissioner, Margaret Hamburg, he implemented a ground breaking programme to control drug resistant tuberculosis. He then went to India to help set up a tuberculosis control programme there. More recently, as New York City health commissioner, he was leading efforts to control the first concentrated outbreak of pandemic flu in the US right up until he left his post on 7 June.

It is Frieden’s reputation for taking bold action on prevention of non-communicable disease, however, that particularly excites many public health advocates. Over the past seven years, Frieden and New York City mayor, Michael Bloomberg, brought in several pioneering laws—the city was one of the first places to prohibit smoking in bars and restaurants, to ban trans fatty acids from restaurant food, and to require fast food restaurant chains to put prominent calorie counts on menus and menu boards.² All this was achieved in the face of fierce industry opposition.

“We still view obesity the way people viewed infectious diseases 150 years ago: as a personal failing, a reflection of something wrong that an individual has done,”

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explains Dr Frieden. “And while, on the one hand, we can’t absolve people of personal responsibility to eat well, be active, and live healthily, on the other hand, in the United States today if you go with the flow you will become obese or overweight. Two thirds of American adults are, and that number has doubled in the past two decades—and this doubling is not because our genes have changed or we’re more gluttonous or lazier than we used to be. It’s because the structure of our society has changed, and the only way we are going to change it back is by changing the structure again.” These will be welcome words to people involved in fighting obesity, who continually struggle to convince policy makers that the problem won’t be solved by simply telling people to eat less and exercise more.

Dr Frieden is well aware that the real challenge will be to persuade politicians to take action on some key issues. “If it has to do with making healthier foods cheaper, making unhealthier foods more expensive, or restricting where junk food can be sold or marketed, then those are controversial areas. But if we want to address obesity, which is not only costing billions of dollars but undermining health for millions of Americans, these are issues that we’re going to have to consider,” he added.

At the launch of CDC’s recommendations for community measures to prevent obesity

last month, Frieden issued a similarly strident message.³ The fact that he also floated the idea of a “soda tax” within two months of taking up post in the city that is home to Coca Cola’s global headquarters won’t have gone unnoticed by those who hope that the new administration will not be afraid to challenge industry interests.⁴

Medical and public health groups warmly welcomed Frieden’s appointment. “Dr Frieden is a bold leader who has the courage to shake up the status quo if science and evidence show that change needs to happen. He doesn’t shy away from the tough problems,” said Jeff Levi, executive director of public health advocacy group, Trust for America’s Health. Lanny Smith, associate professor of medicine at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, has known Frieden since he was a junior doctor, and they shared an interest in health and rights in Central America. “As the saying goes, he ‘cleaned up well’ and fights the social justice fight from within the mainstream now,” he says of Frieden. “He has done a lot of good, whether with the trans-fat ban, calorie labelling, tobacco ban in restaurants, household surveys to get health data, or opening health offices in the Bronx and Harlem.”

But there have also been a few dissenting voices. As health commissioner in New York, Frieden clashed with some community AIDS groups who have criticised his approach.⁵ There were also critics of his attempt to remove one of the obstacles to voluntary HIV testing by eliminating the requirement for separate written consent for an HIV test.⁶

And in the 1990s, Richard Coker, now professor of public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, raised concerns about the implications for marginalised groups of changes to the law introduced as part of the tuberculosis programme Frieden led in New York.⁷ These legal changes—which were only a small part of the wide ranging programme—enabled coercive methods, such as detention, to be used to improve adherence to treatment.

This tension between protecting public health and individual freedom is one that health policy makers are regularly faced with. A key part of CDC’s role is to equip decision makers—whether in Washington or at the state and local levels—with unbiased

and objective information to enable them to weigh up the pros and cons of different policy options. “Often the decisions will need to be made by others,” admits Dr Frieden. “But at least we can identify what the winnable battles are, and what the health benefits would be if we were to win them.”

Political will

While Frieden—and the health department he headed—clearly pushed forward the ambitious public health agenda in New York, the mayor’s political leadership was also important. Speaking to me last July, Frieden insisted that “reasons one, two and three” for New York’s bold approach to public health were Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and he praised the mayor’s willingness to take the political heat.²

In his new role Frieden will be working with former colleague Margaret Hamburg, who now heads the Food and Drug Administration, and he will, of course, be looking to President Obama for political leadership. The president has already seen how health issues can overheat—especially when they threaten vested interests. Frieden, though, emphasises the administration’s commitment to science. “President Obama talks about ensuring that facts and evidence are never obscured or twisted by politics or ideology,” he says. “And with that as our guiding principle we can achieve an enormous amount, both in this country and globally.”

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