

ACPM Member Spotlight:
Ed Fess, MD, MBA and CMO of Care1st Health Plan—Arizona

Donna Grande, MGA, CEO of ACPM

ACPM members are exceptional professionals that cover a diverse swath of the health care ecosystem. I recently had an opportunity to meet one of our members, Dr. Ed Fess, MD, MBA, Board-certified in Preventive Medicine (2014) who has resided in Honolulu, Hawaii for over 20 years with his wife. In the midst of a pandemic, it is challenging to engage with members and to have social time together, but Dr. Fess was able to share his career journey with me and offer some key insights virtually.

What first attracted you to the specialty of Preventive Medicine?

I was originally trained in Emergency Medicine, but instead of taking my board exam, I opted for an MBA, which aided me in entering the new world of Managed Care. While getting my MBA, I ended up working for an awesome mentor who was a County Health Officer, board certified in Preventive Medicine and a Fellow of ACPM. He taught me a lot, including the direct correlation between Population Health, Preventive Medicine, and what I wanted to do in managed care.

What was the proverbial ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’ that made you decide to go for your PMPH Boards?

Because I started in managed care in California during the late 1980s, I essentially “grew up” with many medical director-based roles as the managed care world developed. After being out on my own as a consultant for many years, I came back to health plan work which by then required board certification for all Chief Medical Officers. I recalled the teachings of my mentor from years earlier and looked into getting Preventive Medicine and Public Health Board certification. It was a long road as I took classes and studied on my own for the better part of two years, but I was amazed at how applicable and helpful it was to my job as CMO for a health plan. I realized then that while I had been in the world of managed care all those years, I had really been practicing Preventive Medicine.



Dr. Ed Fess, MD, MBA

You have had a prestigious and diverse business career working in HMOs, hospitals, clinics, and health plans. What has been the most rewarding part of your work?

For me, it has been leadership. Acting as a manager for many years and as a consultant for many more, the real constant for me has been affecting positive changes within the healthcare system through leadership. It took me a while to learn what leadership meant, what it was and how to be effective. Whether making a process easier, incorporating a digital solution, working with patients and physicians to figure out complex system problems, or just developing new initiatives like increased vaccine use, the one constant has been the

enjoyment I get out of being an effective leader in the world of Preventive Medicine.

How has the training/education in Preventive Medicine positioned you for your current role and function as a CMO?

I learned relatively late in my career that I was actually practicing Preventive Medicine. Once I went through the process to become board certified, I've enjoyed my work immensely. So much of Preventive Medicine applies to daily life as a CMO. Many of the skills I learned provided me with a breadth of knowledge and are directly applicable to my work, including reviewing studies on new medications, devices, or clinical programs; interacting with the state regulatory agencies and public health departments; dealing with a multitude of communicable diseases; and even understanding the overall infrastructure of Public and World Health. And yes, I even use what I learned in biostatistics!

What advice would you offer to young physicians who are beginning their journey in medicine?

This may sound trite or over-used, but my elevator speech is: "Do something you really enjoy and that will keep you interested for years to come." As the psychology pundits all say, to be fulfilled we must have work that is meaningful to us, and gives us a true sense of both accomplishment and relevance. But the caveat to that is to not worry about being in the perfect role at first. A career lasts a long time and things will change, sometimes dramatically.

When I was just starting out, thinking I was choosing my life's work, I went into something I truly enjoyed and that gave me a real sense of satisfaction. But then one day I decided I could have a much greater impact on improving healthcare if I worked through an HMO and dealt with large populations of people. That changed my career in a direction I never could have envisioned when I was graduating from medical school.

As you reflect on your own professional career, what is the best advice you received that made a difference in the opportunities you explored or the risks that propelled your career?

I've spent some time learning about the careers of physician leaders I admire. One thing I've noticed they all have in common is engagement in their work. Being engaged in my pursuits has certainly worked for me, as well. If a person is excited and engaged in their work, that work will generally lead to something more, or a new pathway, or an unexplored area, resulting in what I mentioned earlier: doing what you really are good at doing. Once there, a person can make the most impact and generally have the most satisfaction.

From your point of view, what is the key benefit that a professional association such as ACPM can offer an individual?

Whether it's attending the annual conferences, which I love, or meeting professionals in varying roles and pursuits, reading up on what the college is doing nationally, or learning something new in the Journal, the ACPM provides me with connectedness. When I was first out of residency, being connected didn't seem to be that important. After all, I had just come from a society of residents, attendings and administrators in my specialty. But as I've gained experience, changed my direction, and moved among other physicians, healthcare organizations and managed care organizations, being connected to a professional society has become vitally important. I only wish I had become involved earlier in my career. I'm at a point now where I want to become more involved in the ACPM and am looking forward to how I can help make a difference for what I believe is the most important pursuit in Medicine—the overall health of our population.