

ACPM Member Spotlight: Lisa Waddell, MD, MPH

Donna Grande, MGA, CEO of ACPM

Preventive medicine physicians have been humbly serving the public good in their various roles throughout the pandemic and often are not seen as public health officials nor as physicians, but as community leaders. The diversity of the profession has become ever more real as members share their work, their dedication and their service to public health in these varied roles. Previous spotlights have included Dr. Tista Ghosh of Colorado, Dr. Maria Mora Pinzon of Wisconsin, Dr. Ed Fess of Arizona and Dr. Chris Pernell of New Jersey; all are engaged members of the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM). In this issue, you are being introduced to Dr. Lisa Waddell, a board-certified Preventive Medicine physician who has been serving as the Chief Medical Officer of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Foundation — an independent nonprofit that has been filling many of the roles across the country to ensure the public health infrastructure can withstand the devastating blows from Covid-19.



Lisa Waddell, MD, MPH

What attracted you to the specialty of preventive medicine?

I learned about preventive medicine from a former Assistant Secretary of Health. I had some personal and professional experiences that made me want to do more to impact the system of health care. I wanted to help prevent some of the disparate outcomes I was seeing and have a greater impact on as many people as possible. I learned that public health and preventive medicine was the best way to do this; I found my niche and fell in love with the field.

How did your training in preventive medicine prepare you for your current role?

My residency training integrated me into the state and local health department, so I really appreciated the hands-on practical approach to my training. It provided me an early-career opportunity to engage in policy and programmatic work with experts in the field. The

didactic learning coupled with the practical applications prepared me to know what questions to ask, what issues to watch out for and the power of using data to gain a deeper understanding of complex issues in order to apply practical solutions. I witnessed early in my career how regulations and policies were developed and the important leadership roles public health and preventive medicine physicians provided during this process.

You have had an incredible career path. What was the most challenging role thus far and why?

It has been an interesting career and I have learned so much from each role. I have approached each one as an opportunity to grow, learn and have an impact. Serving in a senior leadership role in a state health department was filled with the most rewarding challenges and opportunities. No day or week was ever the same. The size, scope, number of programs and personnel, persistent

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fiscal challenges, complexity of issues and more all contributed to the best lessons. It was in that role where I really learned the power of partnerships and how to effectively address complex public health issues by leveraging public/private partnerships. It takes a team with internal and external stakeholders all aligned and focused on the mission to make a difference. I am always grateful for having a strong team of committed public health professionals working with me together to make a difference.

As you work with health departments to fill the gaps caused by the pandemic, what role do you see for preventive medicine trained physicians?

Preventive medicine physicians bring such a unique and needed perspective to the table; we understand programs, policy and practice and the importance of systems changes. We value engaging the community and understand the need to address root causes and the structural and systemic issues leading to health inequities in order to improve health. Now more than ever, the expertise of trained preventive medicine physicians is needed to lead during this historic public health crisis. Serving as the first Chief Medical Officer for the CDC Foundation and providing the leadership to mobilize a public health workforce to support health departments as they fight the pandemic has been incredibly rewarding. Through this work we saw yet again unacceptable health inequities. Being a part of an organization who is prioritizing capacity building work to support community-based organizations in order to achieve health equity is a highlight of my career as a preventive medicine physician.

As key stakeholder groups continue to convene to develop plans for the future of public health, what do you hope to see for preventive medicine physicians?

As the future of public health unfolds and is being redefined, I hope that the unique expertise and experience of preventive medicine physicians becomes more visible. More resources to support training programs are needed; and support for those working in the field to be able to mentor new preventive medicine physicians is also needed. It would be great if every local public health department had a preventive medicine physician leader or advisor; and if every state health department had a

cadre of preventive medicine physicians as part of the leadership, policy and programmatic teams. And as the public relies on social media, the role that preventive medicine physicians can play as expert communicators on key public health issues should be optimized. As we all work to achieve health equity, preventive medicine physicians understand taking a systems approach to solve complex issues — we are leaders and can be more instrumental in creating a movement to achieve health equity for all

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

I was fortunate to have a mentor early in my career who advised me to venture out and see what other state leaders were doing in the field. That advice gave me confidence to be willing to take on new opportunities early in my career which built confidence in my knowledge and abilities as well as the ability to make long lasting professional relationships. So, make connections, build relationships, get a mentor and be willing to stretch and take on new challenges.

What is the best advice you received that made a difference in your career decisions?

Stretch! Lean into new opportunities. You may question if you are ready for them, but if your mentor says go for it, they likely see your potential. I did that early and often and have never regretted any of my decisions. As a result, I have worked in key leadership roles in local, state and national public health. And now, I am working for a national non-profit that works on timely, critical public health issues each and every day. It is an incredible experience!

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

Being a part of your professional organization is a great way to network; a great way to stay current in the field; a great way to give back; and a great way to continuously see all of the possibilities and ways in which preventive medicine physicians are and can contribute to a healthier society.