Preventive Medicine physicians are an extremely diverse group of physicians, each bringing incredible expertise and experiences to their roles and sharing a common passion for prevention. With each interaction with a member, I become more fascinated in their roles and pathways to becoming board certified physicians in preventive medicine and inspired by their career journey. This month’s spotlight features a member who emulates a passion for public service through the many roles he has served, including his current position as Chief Medical Officer (CMO) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health (OASH) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) with the Federal government.

If you are interested in learning more about preventive medicine physicians, please note that previous spotlights have included Dr. Michael Crupain of New York, Dr. Tista Ghosh of Colorado, Dr. Maria Mora Pinzon of Wisconsin, Dr. Ed Fess of Arizona, Dr. Chris Pernell of New Jersey and Dr. Lisa Waddell of Atlanta, who are all engaged members of the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM). Now, I share insights and perspectives from Dr. Leith States, CMO of OASH, USDHHS.

What attracted you to the specialty of Preventive Medicine?

I was unknowingly exposed to the values of preventive medicine early in my career as a Navy Medical Corps Officer. The military is comprised of a unique population that is a force in readiness. A critical element of that readiness is force health protection, which are the measures taken to promote, protect, improve, conserve, and restore the mental and physical well-being of service members. This was the blueprint I was given to ensure the readiness of the Marines and Sailors placed in my care as a Battalion Surgeon. But it was not until I was deployed to Afghanistan that I discovered Preventive Medicine as an actual program in which I could pursue residency training. Add to that the other specialties and subspecialties to pursue and I was sold on preventive medicine being the course I would pursue for continued medical training.

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

Training at Loma Linda University, I found myself challenged to think critically about my role as a physician and how I could do the greatest good to support the wellness of the communities I served. I also discovered how critical it was to acknowledge that healthcare’s impact on a population was a dimension of, but not the solution for, population health and well-being. That process of critical thinking developed a mindset based on pragmatic solutions to difficult problem sets, and it has been invaluable to growth in my current role. Preventive medicine training has also made me adaptable to a broad variety of topic areas. There is typically a public health dimension to each issue that my
office within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services touches (e.g., substance use disorder, HIV transmission, Long COVID), and the foundational knowledge that I gained in training has permitted the capacity to stay focused on the forest while avoiding the tunnel vision of the trees that may encumber efforts to respond to emerging public health issues.

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

Hands down the most exciting role has been as a General Medical Officer. The Navy requires some physicians to serve with operational forces (e.g., Surface Warfare, Fleet Marine Force) for a two-to-three-year term. This typically starts at the conclusion of the internship year, shortly after the U.S. Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 3 is completed and state medical licenses are fresh in hand. It is at this point that these new providers are entrusted with the health and well-being of over 1,000 servicemembers and a medical staff of somewhere between 40-60 Corpsmen and potentially a couple advanced practice providers. This transition takes about two weeks and then it is off to the races with domestic training exercises, international training exercises, and combat deployments becoming regular occurrences. All of this occurs one year out of medical school with no supervising attending. Needless to say, it forced me to grow up as a provider and an Officer quickly; AND, made me realize that I was only going to be as successful as my Corpsmen would make me. Serving with Marine and Corpsmen provided the capacity to live out servant leadership and to walk humbly among those I lead.

Your service in Afghanistan is remarkable. What advice do you have for younger physicians serving in the military?

My general rule of thumb while I was on active duty was to advise junior Officers to take advantage of the unique opportunities serving as a physician in uniform provides. The training, assignments, and deployments that being a military physician provides cannot be matched as a civilian. The capacity to be exposed to other nation’s militaries, cultures, societies, and approaches to governance is not easy to come by and should be actively nurtured as a young physician.

There is also a density of leadership styles that Medical Officers can be exposed to that they should seek out. Staff Corps Officers (e.g., lawyers, nurses, physicians, chaplains) can be lulled into the fallacy that they are a professional that happens to wear an Officer’s uniform. But while we serve on active duty the expectation is that we are Officers first. And that means leadership lessons can be picked up from anyone in uniform from our most junior enlisted to a senior flag Officer.

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

Wow. This is a tough one, but I think the sentiment that sticks with me most over time is that the next decision won’t be the last one. They’re going to keep coming and you’re going to continue to have to make them. Don’t sweat them to the point of paralysis. Make the best decision based on the information at hand and course correct as needed.

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

Prior to attending the ACPM Annual Conference (PM 2022) I did not appreciate the sense of belonging that comes with professional association membership. I was able to see friends and colleagues that I had not seen in years, had never met in person, or had just lost touch with. As with many areas of life, it is a beautiful moment when you realize you are not alone. Beyond that, I have loved engaging with the College around activities such as advocacy, committee membership, and moderating webinars. The College has provided me with a wonderful lifeline to stay engaged with a community that I value very much.