

# A World Where People Live Longer, Healthier Lives

An Interview with Tom Frieden, MD, MPH, President and Chief Executive Officer, Resolve to Save Lives

**EDITORS' NOTE** Tom Frieden is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Resolve to Save Lives, an organization he founded in 2017 with the mission to prevent epidemics and save lives from cardiovascular disease. Under his leadership, the organization has already helped prevent nearly 8 million deaths worldwide. He previously served as Director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from 2009 to 2017, where he led the nation's response to major health threats including the Ebola epidemic and the opioid crisis. Before that, he was Commissioner of the New York City Health Department, where his groundbreaking policies on tobacco control and nutrition led to a historic increase in life expectancy. Frieden's global impact began even earlier, working with the World Health Organization in India to combat tuberculosis, saving millions of lives. He is board-certified in internal medicine and infectious diseases, has authored over 250 scientific publications, and is a member of the National Academy of Sciences. His new book, *The Formula for Better Health*, offers practical insights from his decades of experience.



Tom Frieden

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Resolve to Save Lives ([resolvetosavelives.org](http://resolvetosavelives.org)) is a global health non-profit organization dedicated to preventing millions of deaths from the world's leading health threats. The organization works with governments and partners in over 60 countries to prevent epidemics by strengthening public health systems and improving outbreak response; control high blood pressure, the leading cause of death globally, by supporting treatment programs that have reached over 34 million people; and promote healthier food, including efforts to eliminate artificial trans-fat and reduce salt intake worldwide. Resolve to Save Lives combines technical expertise, policy advocacy, and scalable solutions to build a healthier, safer world.

## Will you discuss your career journey?

I started as a philosophy major, completing the minimum premedical requirements while exploring perception and ethics. During medical school, I earned a public health degree. I completed my internal medicine residency at Columbia during the height of the AIDS epidemic, with the searing experience of caring for

hundreds of patients – mostly men – for whom we could do little beyond ensuring they died comfortably.

I finished infectious disease training at Yale and epidemic intelligence service training at the CDC. As a CDC epidemic intelligence officer, I investigated two dozen outbreaks, from food poisonings to toxins and more, focusing on the emerging multidrug-resistant tuberculosis spreading through New York City. I documented the disease's dramatic increase, then became director of tuberculosis control and assistant health commissioner. We controlled tuberculosis faster than anyone thought possible – not due to my work alone, but by following advice from mentors including Karel Styblo and John Sbarbaro, and because so much of the

multidrug-resistant tuberculosis was from recent spread, which meant that stopping spread reduced cases quickly – by 80 percent in just a few years.

As tuberculosis fell in New York City, I took my dream job helping India address tuberculosis during five stressful yet rewarding years. After 9/11, as someone born, trained, and mostly having worked in NYC, I returned as New York City health commissioner under Mike Bloomberg for nearly eight years, implementing projects that reduced preventable deaths and extended life expectancy by three years. When Barack Obama asked me to direct the CDC, I spent eight frustrating years in Atlanta. CDC has been a fantastic institution, but has some significant problems and more importantly has very limited purview to influence State and local health departments as well as the things that drive health in the U.S. It was a shock after being NYC Health Commissioner to have so little influence as the director. After leaving the CDC, I founded Resolve to Save Lives.

## Did you always know that you wanted to pursue a career in public health?

My father observed that I liked both politics and science. He said when you combine those, you get public health. I knew before medical school that I wanted to go into public health to maximize my impact. Initially, I considered psychiatry to impact individuals deeply – a field I still respect enormously. Instead, I chose a field where the patient is an entire community, country, or even the world.

## What are the most urgent public health challenges facing the U.S. today?

Four urgent challenges. First, the destruction of U.S. public health infrastructure for domestic and global health. Second, the risk of another pandemic for which we remain dangerously underprepared. Third, today's leading killers that we fail to address effectively – especially hypertension, tobacco use, unhealthy nutrition, and alcohol use. Fourth, the spread of misinformation that obscures the six fundamental keys to healthy living outlined in my book.

## What was your vision for creating Resolve to Save Lives, and how do you define its mission?

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We work on issues at the tipping point. We work with partners to identify the highest-impact interventions, build the political and technical systems to implement them, then scale successful models globally. As a medium-sized global health nonprofit, we have impact by finding the right leverage point – finding areas that are on the bubble and catalyzing rapid progress. I often think of the saying attributed to Archimedes: if you have a lever long enough and the right place to stand, you can move the world. Resolve to Save Lives is that right place to stand.

**Will you provide an overview of Resolve to Save Lives' priorities?**

We have two core priorities and several new approaches. First, we make the world safer from epidemics by helping countries build capacity to find threats faster and stop them sooner. Second, we scale up interventions that can prevent 100 million cardiovascular deaths over 30 years. We are also expanding our work on lead poisoning prevention, which causes cardiac disease and undermines child development.

A cross-cutting priority is to strengthen primary healthcare systems. Only with strong primary healthcare can we find and stop epidemics faster and treat people who need long-term medications to prevent heart attacks and strokes. We use technical, operational, and policy approaches to identify health threats that can be stopped, rapidly co-create and test simple solutions, and scale up proven solutions worldwide. And we always work to strengthen governments, support civil society, and bolster accurate and timely country-owned data systems to keep everyone accountable and on track.

**What interested you in writing the book, *The Formula for Better Health*?**

During the Ebola epidemic ten years ago, I realized that few people understand why public health matters, what it consists of, or how to do it right. I wanted to convey those three concepts to the public, to healthcare professionals, and to program implementers.

**What are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

*The Formula for Better Health* highlights the importance of public health, explains what effective public health consists of, and demonstrates how to implement it successfully at scale. At its core, the book outlines what works, why it works, and how to get it done efficiently. It emphasizes that public health is most effective when it is focused, measurable, and accountable. Even in the face of daunting challenges, progress is possible when evidence-based strategies are applied consistently, and results are rigorously tracked. It also makes the case that many of the greatest public health achievements go unnoticed precisely because they prevent harm before it happens – reducing blood pressure, averting epidemics, extending life. Prevention should be seen as both heroic and urgent.

Another central theme is that leadership and management are as essential as medicine. Whether fighting tuberculosis in New York or heart disease in Africa, success often depends on good data, operational discipline, and sustained political will. These lessons are highly relevant for leaders in health and beyond.

Ultimately, I wrote this book to provide a roadmap for how governments, organizations, and individuals can drive meaningful change, improve population health, and help create a world where preventable death becomes rare.

**When you look to the future of public health, what excites you most, and what concerns you the most?**

I am most excited by the potential for future progress through new technologies combined with rigorous application of the proven formula to save millions of lives and help individuals do what they want to do for longer. Never before have we been closer to a world where preventable death becomes rare.

What concerns me most: we may fail to marshal forces to overcome opposition to effective health action. If this happens, too many people will continue to suffer and die young, causing enormous tragedies for individuals, families, communities, countries, and the world. ●

