The Growing Role of Chief Medical Officers in Major Corporations

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The past 2 years have revealed to companies and leaders across all industries how heavily dependent their performance is on considerations of health—including not only the health, safety, and well-being of employees, but also broader considerations of physical space usage, ventilation, and customer interactions, among many others. The pandemic has, in no small measure, shifted health concerns from simply a component of Human Resources planning to a central consideration for Chief Executive Officers and other senior leaders grappling with how their organization can survive and achieve successful performance.

Amid this growing recognition of the many ways health considerations (and their associated costs) affect the bottom line of all organizations, we are seeing a trend of corporations implementing a key leadership position to help navigate these challenges: the corporate Chief Medical Officer (CMO). Though the CMO role is commonly found in health care and related industries (eg, in pharmaceutical or biotechnology firms), CMO roles have been introduced in the past several years in large corporations as disparate as Google, Tyson Foods, Delta, Salesforce, Constellation Brands, Royal Caribbean, General, BP, Woolworths, Uber, and the National Football League, with the popular business press reporting an almost 19% increase in CMO postings in recent years as companies of all types consider implementing the role.1-3

The exact nature of the CMO role across these organizations varies by the nature of their industry, but CMOs generally have a broad responsibility for all health issues that can affect a company,4 providing guidance to corporate leaders on regulatory affairs, managing employee health and well-being, and communicating medical information to internal and external stakeholders.3 Some CMOs are focused primarily on customer health and service capacity (eg, companies in the travel industry considering customer density and distancing), while others are more focused on occupational health and safety policies (eg, organizations responding to emergent employee health concerns) or on the opportunities for expanding a company’s business into the health sector (eg, Uber’s expansion into nonemergency medical transportation services). Moreover, as many corporations seek ways to control rising health care costs through initiatives that include workplace health clinics and partnerships with retail health organizations, some are adding the CMO role to provide high-level leadership to better navigate these expensive investments that may provide meaningful returns for the company.

Most of those hired into CMO positions are physicians, tasked with using their medical knowledge and patient care experience to guide the organization’s strategies in ways that account for the physical—and increasingly, mental—health of employees and other stakeholders. Yet despite being physicians first, CMOs are frequently called on to lead efforts that extend far beyond traditional clinical care, requiring knowledge of the company’s other functions and operations, relevant industry policies and standards, and the necessary terminology and facility for collaborating with other corporate leaders (eg, executives focused on sales, marketing, operations, and finance).4 Extending the traditional role of occupational medicine and its focus on employee health and safety, corporate CMOs are increasingly central to a broad range of financial and strategic decisions, requiring them to make recommendations regarding evolving aspects of health care delivery, including dynamic payer and value-based care models.

As the pandemic broadened organizations’ health-related concerns, many now turn to CMOs to provide guidance and expertise on a range of public health issues, such as designing return-to-work...
plans and office density requirements, interpreting federal and state vaccination policies, developing COVID-monitoring and contact-tracing procedures, and maintaining equitable practices across global workforces with different regulatory environments. These efforts reflect the pandemic-induced recognition that corporations have an important role to play in the societal health production function: health is achieved not simply from clinicians delivering care, but from individual choices and behavior, home and community influence, and workplace policies and practices.

Is the physician community prepared to participate in this broader ecosystem of workplace health production? The growth of corporate CMOs is, in some ways, just one example of how medical training must be reconsidered to ensure physicians are leaders in producing health across a range of career paths, rather than in just delivering medical care in traditional clinical settings. Recent years have seen a growing interest from medical school graduates in pursuing these sorts of nonstandard career paths, but preparing physicians to contribute in this way requires reimagining medical training, shifting away from the linear development of increasingly specialized clinical competencies to a broader outcome-focused approach that recognizes and incorporates the many inputs to individual and community health, and prepares physicians to engage in the many arenas where this health gets produced. To the general public, a physician may be expected to have expert knowledge of these many health-relevant domains—epidemiology, health policy, occupational health, research and product safety, health care management, clinical operations, health care benefits design, and health equity—yet the reality is that most medical school and residency curricula feature relatively little in the way of training in public health and policy or in the core business and management skills that might be expected of a senior corporate leader.

To better prepare physicians to take on a CMO role, medical schools and professional societies will need to consider new educational programs and training opportunities that can provide individuals the blend of clinical expertise and business acumen needed to succeed in these positions. An optimal system might include foundational education in these concepts in medical school (with additional elective experiences through affiliated business schools or health system initiatives), combined with more formal postgraduate training (building on emerging efforts to establish accredited fellowship programs in these areas) and other opportunities for physicians further along in their careers to gain experience with the daily operations, norms, expectations, and culture of a corporate environment. These expanded opportunities are necessary, as existing pathways for developing these skills are currently somewhat limited. Indeed, many existing formal programs or structured efforts to expose physicians to these domains, such as executive education or physician leadership development programs focused on the “Business of Health,” are often focused primarily on how physician leaders can incorporate broader business and management concepts into their leadership in traditional health care settings (eg, as a hospital administrator) or health-related industries (eg, in a pharmaceutical company). Yet the challenge for CMOs is often the reverse: how to successfully integrate health considerations into more traditional business operations, which requires more prolonged, multidimensional exposure to business than typically received in these sorts of shorter-form trainings.

This broadly oriented CMO role represents a significant departure from the typical physician career path, but one with considerable opportunity to improve the health and well-being of large numbers of people through strategy and operational decisions that influence entire organizations and their stakeholders. As this role becomes more common in the corporate landscape, many questions remain to be answered about how medicine can meet this expanding opportunity requiring a truly unique set of skills: a solid grounding in medicine, expertise in public health, and facility in the business of running a corporation in a particular industry. However, it is clear that corporations are increasingly seeing the value of hiring a CMO, so it is incumbent on the medical profession to consider not only how business can influence health, but also how physicians can be best positioned to bring health into business.
REFERENCES


