

Tulane Med alumna, Google Health's chief health officer, helps with COVID-19 response

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Karen DeSalvo, Tulane University School of Medicine and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine alumna, serves as the chief health officer at Google Health. She pioneered makeshift clinics to provide primary care to residents following Hurricane Katrina and is now helping to provide vital information to people worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Karen DeSalvo, MD, MPH, (M '92, PHTM '92, R '94, R '96) currently serves as chief health officer at Google Health. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Dr. DeSalvo, who at the time was vice dean for community affairs and health policy and

professor of medicine at Tulane University School of Medicine, pioneered makeshift clinics across New Orleans to provide primary care to residents. She later went on to serve as the New Orleans Health Commissioner and the U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary for Health.

Q: You were on the frontlines of health care after Hurricane Katrina, and you have been quoted as saying about that time: “We were making our wings as we were falling off the cliff. It's not thinking out of the box because we got rid of the box.” I feel that could be said about healthcare providers now who are treating patients to the best of their ability with a virus that we’re learning more about every day. Do you feel that’s accurate? How so or in what ways do you feel this situation is different?

A: *The COVID-19 pandemic is a once in a lifetime occurrence for all of us - my former classmates, colleagues and students on the frontlines. COVID-19 is brand new and it has been extraordinary to watch the collaboration between the medical, research and public health communities to accelerate scientific solutions and save lives. These insights and collaborations are providing us some of the needed grounding to make rapid decisions in these uncertain times.*

In many ways it is very much like the post-Katrina experience where we were devising plans as the scenarios were still unfolding. What is clearly different is that Katrina was not a health crisis in and of itself, but it brought on a host of health challenges. The health care system was under duress and rose heroically to the occasion. Thousands lost their lives, countless suffered exacerbation of chronic disease, and many others had mental health challenges for years to come. These types of challenges will also be part of the COVID-19 narrative, especially when we move past treating the acute SARS-CoV-2 infections.

Q: What lessons do you think Hurricane Katrina has to teach us to help with this current pandemic? Do you see any similarities between Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic?

A: *Hurricane Katrina was a shared tragedy for everyone in New Orleans. Though some neighborhoods and communities were more affected than others, the tragedy impacted the entire city. As a result, we suffered together, grieved together, and ultimately recovered together. Now, with this pandemic, we are seeing something similar happen on a global scale. This virus is in almost every country and we are all*

fighting it at once. That means that we are going through this shared experience together globally, and we will recover together globally, as well. I am moved by both the small and large acts of kindness around the world, like applauding healthcare workers in public, and I anticipate more to come.

Q: Google has launched a coronavirus website with health resources, among many other initiatives - what role does a private company like Google have to play in a time of crisis like this?

A: Helping people get the right information to stay healthy is more important than ever in the face of a global pandemic like COVID-19. We literally have billions of people depending on Google products to get through a normal day. Right now, the pandemic is the largest topic people are looking for globally on Google Search. That's why our priority is to make sure our products are serving users well and that we are helping people stay safe, informed and connected. My team is made up of nurses, physicians and public health experts who are providing clinical leadership to our products like Search and YouTube to ensure that users are getting authoritative information on COVID-19. For example, when people look up COVID-19 on Search, they're taken to a page that offers official information on symptoms, links to local public health authorities and more.

Q: As chief health officer for Google Health, what initiatives are you leading in response to COVID-19 right now?

A: Last week we also launched the Community Mobility Reports, a tool that gathers insights on how communities have reacted to social distancing measures. These reports provide the community with insights into what has changed in response to work from home, shelter in place, and other policies aimed at flattening the curve of this pandemic. We're already hearing from public health officials that this type of aggregated, anonymized data is really useful as they make critical decisions to combat COVID-19.

Q: With your role as Google's chief health officer and your extensive experience in public health, you have unique insight to the effects and implications of this pandemic. What do you hope to see in the next few months? A year from now?

A: First and foremost, we need an effective vaccine that can prevent COVID-19 and allow the world to safely return to pre-pandemic social and economic norms.

Secondly, my hope is that as we watch this pandemic spread around the world, we all learn to think and act more globally. For example, we should be more aware of the communities that are most vulnerable, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where seemingly simple actions like hand washing or social distancing are quite challenging. More will need to be done by higher income countries and global health organizations to provide support and bring a united front to fighting the pandemic.

Q: At Tulane you held the roles of chief of general medicine, co-director of the Center for Health Equality Research, special assistant to the university president for health policy, executive director for Tulane University's Community Health Centers, and vice dean for community affairs and health policy. In what ways do you think Tulane is uniquely poised to confront this challenge?

A: *Tulane has an extraordinary set of scientists, clinicians and public health leaders who are already doing amazing work not only in the U.S. but also globally. One of them is Dr. Bob Garry who was my lab instructor when I was a medical student. He was an outstanding teacher and has been a role model to me for the last 30 years of my life, and it has been wonderful to watch him be a part of the scientific world advancing the science so we can develop countermeasures to protect people from SARS-CoV-2.*