

Physicians in government: The FDA and public health

JUN 29, 2016

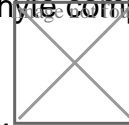
Troy Parks

News Writer

As you complete your medical training and advance in your career as a physician, do you ever wonder about career options outside the exam room? In this new mini-series, we're getting a glimpse of the jobs some physicians take on to support health care in the United States through nonclinical means.

Here's a look into the work of John Whyte, MD, director of professional affairs and stakeholder engagement at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Dr. Whyte completed his medical

training in internal medicine and also holds a Master of Public Health.



What are your main responsibilities in your current role?



My main responsibilities include improving our stakeholders' drug regulatory insight and understanding to:

- Enrich the experience of patients, advocacy groups, health care professionals and agencies in engaging with the FDA
- Provide a focal point for advocacy and two-way engagement on drug development, review and safety
- Enhance safe use of medications and reduce preventable harm from medication misuse, abuse and errors

How did you get into this position?

I actually was recruited to the position. It's a new office at FDA, and they knew of my work communicating health messages at the Discovery Channel.

At the Discovery Channel, I was responsible for health documentaries and medical education programs, both on television and online. This experience made me learn how to distill complicated information into a few salient points. I also appreciated how critical it is to engage and even entertain an audience—after all, there's a reason why Shark Week is so popular!

How did your clinical background equip you to take on this role?

Clinical medicine definitely taught me how to multitask. Just like on the wards and in the emergency room, you need to manage multiple issues contemporaneously.

What do you find the most rewarding about your current job? What do you find the most challenging or surprising?

The ability to change a culture by creating more transparency at a regulatory agency is exciting. The government moves much more slowly, though, than the private sector. And sometimes there are rules and policies that don't quite seem to make sense.

What advice would you give medical residents who are interested in pursuing a career in your current field?

Spend time learning what physicians in government (or in media) really do day-to-day. Search for and ask about participating in four-week internships.

Are there any resources, organizations or networking events you'd suggest for medical residents who are interested in your field?

I have found organized medicine (like the AMA) to be one of the most valuable resources. I have been interested in health policy issues since college. Medical school and residency don't provide you the opportunity to learn about broader policy issues. But being involved with the AMA, state medical societies and specialty groups provides an unparalleled opportunity to learn a whole new discipline separate from clinical medicine.

What advice would you offer to medical residents on how to find a mentor in your profession?

Be creative. If the job you want doesn't exist, think of ways you can create it. Several of my jobs were ones for which I created the role. Reach out and talk to people. Most leaders are interested in talking to residents and students. But be prepared: Come with questions and do some homework on the person from whom you want advice.