

BOOK REVIEWS

Original version

THE TALE OF A TURNAROUND IN THE NYC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

SAVING GOTHAM: A BILLIONAIRE MAYOR, ACTIVIST DOCTORS, AND THE FIGHT FOR EIGHT MILLION LIVES

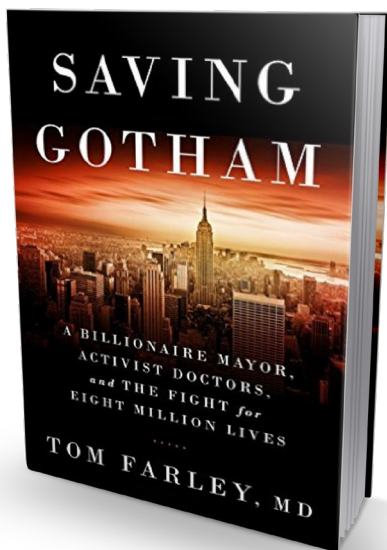
Tom Farley, M.D. New York, USA: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2015, 320p.

When Tom Farley took office as Commissioner of the New York Health Department in 2009, replacing Thomas Frieden, he felt like “taking over as manager of the Yankees after they had won the World Series seven years in a row.” Farley took the helm of a successful change started by Frieden in the centenary New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, created in 1866 with responsibilities from street cleaning and sanitary permits to fight against infectious diseases, such as cholera and yellow fever.

In 2002, Frieden was nominated Commissioner of Health by the new elected mayor, the billionaire Michael Bloomberg and, to accept the position, proposed that the fight against smoking should be a high priority as a public health issue. This proposition did not seem obvious in a city still suffering with the 9/11 events few months earlier and was still afraid of chemical terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, Frieden compared the death toll related to smoking with “three jumbo jetliners crashing into a mountain every day.”

Coming from the financial market, Bloomberg understood numbers. Frieden’s presentation showed him what is generally called as an epidemiologic transition. In affluent societies, sanitation, vaccination, and nutrition had controlled infectious (or communicable) diseases, such as cholera, which were not the big killers anymore. Cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, also known as non-communicable diseases (NCD) emerged at the frontline of killer diseases, instead. In the United States, for example, while 5% of deaths are caused by infectious diseases, 88% are related to NCD.

Changes in disease numbers pointed to a great need for reshaping the City Health Department. NCD are related to lifestyle, and fighting their causes would be necessary to prevent them. Smoking, unhealthy diets (based on sugar, salt, and junk food), sedentarism, and alcohol abuse are the new enemies. However, controlling the behaviors of the population and altering the “toxic” environment would demand new competencies and long-term strategies to be developed by the Health Department.



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Frieden started by building political support with the full personal commitment from the new mayor. Bloomberg embraced Frieden's ideas, and smoking became not only the biggest public health agenda of the city, but a top priority of his administration. According to the mayor's statement, "NCD, especially heart disease and cancer, far outstripped all other causes of death in our city and the single most effective thing that we could do to reduce them was to discourage smoking." This speech sounded more like a discourse coming from a public health professional than from a politician, as Farley notes in the book's preface.

High-level political support was mandatory for making the changes in the city's public health administration; however, it was not enough to convince the public, the media, and of course, the tobacco industry. To influence the City Hall to approve laws restricting access to cigarettes, technical support was needed, not only from traditional public health doctors, but also from lawyers, media, and other specialists.

Data should be provided to support the scientific arguments proving the rationality behind controversial measures such as banning smoking from public spaces due to second-hand smoke. Computer systems were installed in doctors' offices to register data on patient behavior, not without some resistance. Opinion polls also become a data source in evaluating the efficacy of the measures, along with studies on previous cases, such as the California smoking ban acts in place since 1994. Promotion of research findings by the Health Department published in prestigious scientific journals are also effective.

Frieden's work in the Health Department deeply changed New Yorkers' behaviors. Banning smoking in public places, limiting advertising, and increasing taxes on cigarettes led to a reduction in the city's number of smokers, and deaths caused by smoking decreased by 11.2%, from 2003 to 2008. Considering that this is New York City, it is not an exaggeration to say: "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere."

Smoking was just a part of the problem. Excessive trans-fat, salty food, and sweet soda consumption were also habits to be changed to save more lives. However, establishing limits on food and drink consumption seemed like too much government intervention in citizens' lives, especially under Bloomberg's republican administration, usually considered less interventionist.

If taxes on cigarettes and the Smoke-Free Air Act had made healthy choices easier and unhealthy choices harder, the same could be true for eating. Differently from smoking, there was less evidence on the best ways to fight endemic overweight, usually tackled by individual treatment and not by public policy interventions. While doctors work hard to save individual lives,

those who work in public health must act to save millions of lives at once. Considering the number of deaths related to diabetes and heart diseases due to overweight, there was a mission to be accomplished.

Equipped to its new mission, the City Health Department achieved some degree of success with new ban policies. Trans-fat consumption at fast food chains, such as McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut and others, dropped by an average of 2.4 grams per meal, down by about half a gram between 2007 and 2009, after the trans-fat ban took effect in 2006. Actions from the Health Department led some restaurants to reformulate or replace their menus with less trans-fat and healthier meals.

The fight to reduce soft drinks consumption was a major challenge. The battle to establish sweet soda consumption limits was held at the state's Supreme Court, which refused to reinstate the portion cap of 16 ounces proposed by the Health Department. It was a major victory for the American soft drink industry that held the argument that they were defending the New Yorkers' freedom of choice. However, the intense dispute was covered by the media, and public opinion was divided, with around 40% of New Yorkers in favor of the portion cap.

After his successful performance at the New York Health Department, in 2009, Frieden was called by the Obama administration to take over as the Director of U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Tom Farley, had worked for the Center for Disease Control's Epidemic Intelligence Service and the Louisiana Office of Public Health, and was already working as Frieden's advisor since 2007, when was nominated as the commissioner at the NYC Health Department, to replace Frieden in Bloomberg's third term as a mayor, from 2009 to 2014.

After his time as Health Commissioner for the Bloomberg administration, Farley started writing *Saving Gotham*, which is a vivid report on the behind-the-scenes transformation of the Health Department, led by Frieden and Farley himself along with a number of other "activist doctors" (as stated in the book's subtitle.) The eight years of Frieden at the Health Department is narrated in the book's first part, while the second part tells about Farley's time in office.

The New York experience told in this book is an inspiration for policy makers and society in general. For more than 150 years, governments had assumed that the only diseases worth preventing were caused by infections; now it is clear that the reductions in non-infectious diseases will come from gradual interventions to improve and save the lives of the population. As in the title of the last chapter based on Bloomberg's speech at the United Nations: "That is, ultimately, government's highest duty."