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It's Time for Health Care Industry to Take a Fresh Look at Social Impact | by Gloria Barone

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As one of the world's fastest-growing industries and biggest employers, the health care industry has enormous potential to lead the world in social impact. The industry will always need to prioritize improving access to, and affordability of, health care while promoting a CSR approach that can withstand scrutiny in a highly polarized and political environment. For example, offering free preventive health or medical, dental or vision services is a non-controversial and beneficial way to demonstrate CSR generally accepted by all stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, policymakers and the public.

Responding to the most pressing issues of our day, however, from climate change to social justice, may require more from health care organizations. As the healers of the world, the health care industry needs to consider how to flex its considerable CSR muscle. Health care

companies are reflecting on their wider role in environmental and social issues, and the greater expectations among the public for corporate responses. The following areas offer food for thought on the role a health care organization's CSR program could play in creating a healthier world in every sense of the word *health*:

Reframe health, looking at the root causes of illness and disease. Rather than looking only at CSR programs that address the traditional factors in an individual's health such as lifestyle behaviors and genetics, consider the social determinants of health — those environmental and social factors that influence individual and community health status. The United States Centers for Disease Control defines social determinants of health as “life-enhancing resources, such as food supply, housing, economic and social relationships, transportation, education, and health care, whose distribution across populations effectively determines length and quality of life.”

Focusing on social determinants of health could lead a health care organization in any number of directions, supporting safe housing, education, food or transportation systems, all outside the traditional sphere of medical care and insurance.

Reexamine your purpose and anything standing in its way. Consider CVS Health's decision that selling cigarettes was not part of its purpose to help people on their path to better health. On

Sept. 3, 2014, after changing its name to CVS Health, CVS removed tobacco products from its more than 7,800 retail stores in 47 states nationwide. This bold move attracted widespread media attention and prompted speculation that CVS could lose Wall Street's enthusiasm, retail customers and revenue. Yet CVS announced an almost 10 percent increase in revenue at the end of that year despite the negative impact on front-of-the-store sales. Following in CVS Health's footsteps means taking a long, hard look at all policies, practices, products, suppliers and business relationships, and whether any might be standing in the way of fulfilling a health care organization's purpose.

Redefine health in a broader sense. While literacy may not automatically come to mind when thinking about health, an organization in North Carolina called Read and Feed connected the dots between nutrition and reading as essential building blocks to a child's overall health and ability to succeed later in life. They began an unusual after-school literacy program that provides meals, tutoring and books to children from low-income families in Wake County, serving more than 600 children each year through more than 500 volunteers who provide 7,700 hours of tutoring, deliver food and supplies, and sort and distribute 33,000+ books to children annually. The CSR opportunities are limitless when health care organizations embrace their mission and purpose while stepping outside the box of medicine, doctor visits and insurance to the meaning of health in the broadest sense.

Reframe what it means to support diversity. All major health care organizations have a diversity office. But it may be time to retool the diversity focus in keeping step with realities of today such as racial discrimination and the growing multicultural population. For example, more than two in five U.S. doctors will be old enough to retire in the next decade, yet the pipeline of new doctors remains much like it did a generation ago — not nearly as diverse as the overall population. * Only 2.6 percent of the nation's doctors in 2019 and 7.3 percent of students enrolled in medical school in 2020 identified as Black or African-American. A recent National Bureau of Economic Research paper reported that African-American men are more likely to feel comfortable with — and take health direction from — doctors who look like them. Achieving racial health justice depends on many factors that health care organizations can influence, from helping to reform the education system to clear the path for more medical students of color to advocating for a national medical research agenda that ensures that people of color are adequately represented.

Fight climate change. More and more people around the globe are facing the health consequences of wildfires, hurricanes, and floods. According to the World Bank, climate change could drag more than 100 million people back into extreme poverty by 2030, as low-income nations suffer the most through weakened health systems, poor infrastructure and fewer financial resources to enable their recovery. Health care workers and insurers are the first responders to the health effects of climate change, and it would seem natural that they would

also be a leading advocate for lessening climate change. However, health care organizations [lag behind](#) others in sustainability reporting, a practice common among large businesses.** As climate change hits even harder, health care organizations can strike back through building better medical supply chains and distribution networks, creating emergency plans, **supporting and working with** charities and initiatives who fight climate change, and advocating visibly and vocally for change with policymakers.

Join forces with others. Health care is a competitive industry, but no one organization alone can solve the world's problems. Health care organizations shouldn't rule out working with others — even competitors — to build coalitions and use their combined strength for the greater good.

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* “U.S. doctor shortage worsens as efforts to recruit Black and Latino students stall,” *USA Today*, June 26, 2020

** “Assessment of Environmental Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting by Large Health Care Organizations,” *JAMA* (Journal of the American Medical Association), August 3, 2018