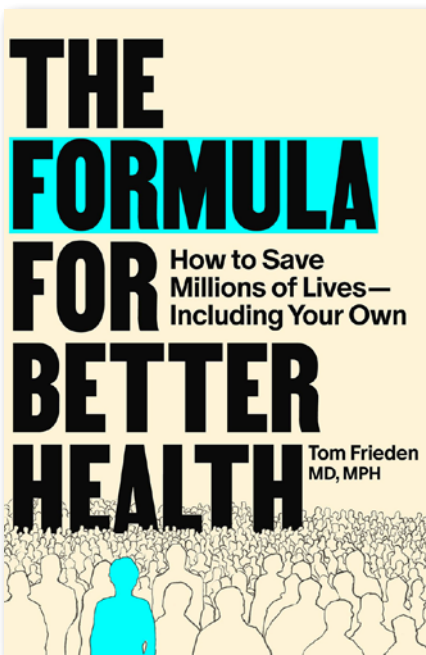


Tom Frieden

The Formula for Better Health: How to Save Millions of Lives—Including Your Own.

MIT Press, 2025, 282 pp.



The history of public health—particularly the history of epidemiology and chronic diseases—offers a compelling demonstration that history is shaped by deep continuities. One such crucial continuity is humanity’s persistent effort to combat these diseases, and more specifically, to fight them successfully by learning how to anticipate them. The author of a recent book on this subject refers to this challenge as breaking Cassandra’s prophecy, framing it within a memorable and narratively striking formula.

The book in question, *The Formula for Better Health: How to Save Millions of Lives—Including Your Own*, was published by Tom Frieden

in late September 2025. Drawing on his extensive professional experience—most notably his tenure as Health Commissioner of New York City under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his term as Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during the presidency of Barack Obama—Frieden structures

the book around a series of episodic chapters. As the current CEO of the global anti-pandemic initiative Resolve to Save Lives, he presents a transepochal history of public health through case studies of exceptional individuals as well as through the lens of political dynamics that shape responses to public health crises.

In this respect, Frieden's approach significantly contributes to the popularization of international relations in medicine and nursing as a distinctive interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of inquiry. As he states in the book's preface, the formula for better health is simple:

Expose the invisible, shatter the illusion of inevitability, and act effectively. In a nutshell: See/Believe/Create. Success requires seeing disease trends, invisible poisons, and the path to progress; understanding the forces that create the Cassandra curse; and executing a meticulous, step-by-step approach to break it. (pp. xv)

The book consists of ten chapters divided into three sections. In terms of style and structure, it follows the conventions of classic Anglo-American non-fiction. In Frieden's case, this takes the form of a series of non-chronologically arranged episodes, each of which addresses a specific problem in public health. These problems are often methodological in nature, or they introduce a particular concept, or explain why certain public health policies may initially appear counterintuitive—and how, in fact, innovative solutions have ultimately resolved major health challenges.

Although Frieden does not primarily engage with history in a direct sense, history functions as the structural backbone of each chapter. He conveys this historical thread most clearly through reflections on his own work as a public health official. In doing so, he blurs the boundary between conventional historical time frames and recent contemporary events, making a distinct contribution to the book and elevating the importance of the history of medicine. The narrative moves effortlessly for the reader from the tuberculosis crisis in New York in the 1990s, to the BioWatch system introduced in response to the anthrax attacks, to the public health policies of Mayor Bloomberg. A key transitional point toward contemporary events is the response to the 2014 Ebola epidemic, after which the central and most recent public health challenge is logically situated in 2020 with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The broader history of medicine is also an indispensable component of the book, which the author presents in a narratively accessible and contemporary manner. Maintaining a strong sense of momentum, the book is rich with compelling accounts of how major public health challenges were identified and how solutions were eventually developed. In a fully transepochal fashion, Frieden re-

counts the story of the London cloth merchant John Graunt, who in 1662 made a major contribution to recognizing life expectancy as a crucial indicator of population health. He also includes the story of Alice Hamilton and the long struggle against lead poisoning due to heavy industrialization. Tuberculosis, one of the book's central topics, is presented historically through the life of Karel Styblo, an epidemiologist interned in a Nazi concentration camp.

This structure mirrors the overall architecture of the book, which is organized according to a model of diagnosing problems—identifying key challenges and outlining approaches to overcoming them, so the first section is titled *See*. The following section, *Believe*, teaches us that we must retain optimism about the potential of public health to achieve remarkable results, while also maintaining humility, as emphasized by the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic. In demonstrating the achievements of public health, history plays a crucial role. This includes not only well-known examples such as the eradication of smallpox or the dramatic reduction in tuberculosis incidence.

The third part of the book, titled *Create*, focuses on proactivity. Here, the author underscores the importance of high-quality institutional management—specifically, the governance of public health personnel—rather than relying solely on rapid and effective scientific work, whether during the 2014 Ebola crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. This section also contains a chapter on achieving progress despite resistance from various industry lobbies. Although this issue appears earlier in the book, here it is examined more comprehensively. Frieden describes, drawing largely from his work under Mayor Bloomberg, how he confronted lobbies representing harmful products such as sweet soda beverages, tobacco, and trans fats. This is one of the book's most instructive sections, raising important questions about the social responsibility of the food industry and other sectors, as in cases where workers were historically exposed to toxic substances such as lead.

By positioning public health as an inherently multidisciplinary field, the author provides readers with clear insights into the intersection of medicine with macroeconomics during periods of industrial transition, the psychology of consumerism—where Frieden challenges the notion of individual free will—and environmental science. The book concludes with a fourth section that applies Frieden's introductory formula to concrete practice, addressing both public health as a whole and the personal health of each individual.

Although written in a popular style and free of footnotes or highly technical terminology that might burden the reader, the book does not lose its scientific rigor. On the contrary, it contains extensive reference lists for each chapter, drawing

on both reports from major organizations and relevant scientific studies. Frieden also cites essential books in the field, including numerous older publications of historical value, which will be of particular interest to historians of medicine. This reference component is especially valuable for specialist readers, as it provides a solid overview of a wide range of medical subfields—encompassing both historical and contemporary literature.

In the conclusion of the book, Tom Frieden recapitulates his central arguments and highlights an important lesson for the history of medicine. He challenges the myth of capitalism as inherently harmful, suggesting instead the possibility of compatibility between a high quality of life and sustained economic growth. This perspective closely echoes the thesis of Joel Mokyr, the Nobel Prize-winning economist honored in 2025, at the time of the book's publication, who argues that technological progress is the key driver of economic development and improved living standards. Frieden closes the book with the following words:

Clean water, sanitary food, and better living conditions reduced infections and extended healthy life expectancy in the twentieth century. Today, the tobacco, alcohol, junk food, gun, and fossil fuel industries are the deadliest vectors of disease. They work to negate each part of the formula: They obscure their products' harms and undermine science so that it's harder to see the damage their products cause and the way forward; they erode belief in progress; and they block public health action. One false narrative these industries promote is that public health is a barrier to economic progress. In fact, better health—including through reduction of the harms these industries cause—accelerates economic progress. Adam Smith, who provided the conceptual underpinning of modern capitalism 250 years ago, recognized that tobacco, alcohol, and sugar are “nowhere necessities of life” and are therefore “extremely proper subjects of taxation.”(p. 192)

One of the most important aspects of the book is its underlying message: public health threats are invisible threats. Equally invisible are the victories, measured in the number of deaths prevented from various diseases—an idea to which we too rarely turn our attention.

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