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- Marianne O'Hare: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care. This week we take a look back at the tumultuous year we have had, and the many leading voices in health care who joined this show to navigate year three of the pandemic. Now, here are your hosts, Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter.
- Mark Masselli: Well, Margaret 2022, coming to a close and I think it's time to take a look back at this remarkable roster of guests who joined us throughout the year and what a challenging year it's been. We began year three of the pandemic with the terrible surge of Omicron.
- Margaret Flinter: In spite of the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines. We marked the start of the year with a huge surge in cases and hospitalizations and a spike in the death toll. That was not the way we were hoping to turn the corner on the pandemic as the year began.
- Mark Masselli: We began the year with a guest who's become a fixture on this show since the pandemic began. Dr. Peter Hotez, internationally renowned physician and scientist, Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, and most importantly, grew up in West Hartford, not far from where we are today. But he shares our grave concern about the growing anti-vax movement.
- Dr. Peter Hotez: Eventually, this will pass and then we've got to decide what the world looks like post Omicron, we know, the old likely Omicron is probably not going to produce much in the way of durable protection, people will still need to get vaccinated. So that's got to be a priority. To me, it's defeating this very aggressive anti-vaccine activities that are causing people to needlessly lose their lives by being defiant of vaccines. 200,000 Americans since June 1, who refused vaccines lost their lives. So, anti-vaccine/anti-science activities are top killer in the United States. So we've got to figure out how to conquer that. And lastly, we've got to vaccinate the world to prevent the new variants from emerging.
- Margaret Flinter: Dr. Hotez has really become quite a trusted voice in this whole debate. And after years of research around SARS, his team developed their own COVID vaccine with the goal of making it available to the whole world in particular, to low resource countries where the lack of vaccines was really devastating. That earned him a Nobel Prize nomination, which we were really thrilled to see.

- Mark Masselli: Well. Another familiar guest joined us in January, Margaret, Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, former adviser to the Obama administration, he issued a call for a new strategy to confront the Omicron surge, as it began to rage out of control.
- Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel: We need a new – a whole new government arrangement, so that automatically Health System, physician offices, labs, download data every day, and we get a public display non-identifiable data about where we're having outbreaks? What kind of viral illnesses are happening? How many people are dying? We really need that data infrastructure. Israel can have it, Britain can have it, we can too. In the modern age, you know, Microsoft, and Google and Amazon and Facebook having these data capacities, we really need to be able to do that.
- Margaret Flinter: And I think we can say Dr. Emanuel was one of many public health officials that were expressing frustration with the administration over what really played as confusing messaging about the pandemic. So, we're very happy to welcome CDC director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky to the show, to really talk about some of those concerns.
- Dr. Rochelle Walensky: I think there's a little bit of misunderstanding, that following the science implies that the science is always clear. It's always black and white. Science is emerging. New science comes every day, sometimes conflicting science emerges. And, you know, I have this great privilege of working with this incredible scientific team, where it's a multidisciplinary group, we have immunologists and epidemiologists, and you know everything in between. And we have robust dialogue about how we interpret new and emerging science. And for the most part, we're unified and on the same page, and I think that that's really terrific. But there is a lot of robust dialogue out there that's playing out in the public view. Usually it's in scientific meetings, but that is, you know, we should be having that scientific dialogue.
- Mark Masselli: Margaret you know, doing this show during the global pandemic has given us a front row seat to the great minds who have been toiling behind the scenes. Dr. Michael Osterholm, from the University of Minnesota has advised many presidential administrations on pandemic preparedness and he warned us in January not to become complacent about this ever changing pathogen as COVID would continue to shape shift.
- Dr. Michael Osterholm: As you know, a year ago I was saying that I thought the darkest days of the pandemic could still be ahead of us based on the

variance. Once I saw Alpha and Beta and Gamma. I said, Wow, this virus has that potential to continue to throw 210 mile an hour curveballs. Well, there's still that chance we're going to have another one. That could be just like Omicron or worse, where it evades immune protection. Were either from vaccines or natural infection, and so we wanted to do was set out an approach that says, well, we got to be ready for something like that. But what if, in fact, that doesn't happen again, and we start to see this become part of the seasonal milieu of respiratory transmitted diseases.

You know, influenza on an average year kills 50 to 70,000 Americans in this country, and so our papers were really about looking and reaching forward with the idea that we need to learn to live with COVID.

Margaret Flinter:

That's right, it certainly wasn't what we wanted to hear when we were being so vigorous with the rollout of the vaccines that began right there at the end of 2020. If you remember Mark the week before New Year's 2020 when vaccines first arrived, so let's not forget Mark, what the pandemic has done to our country's children, to school children who were sent home in March of 2020 as the pandemic took hold, U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona shared why it is so vitally important that our kids be back in the classroom, while still protecting their health and the health of their educators as well.

Miguel Cardona:

What we've done, it happened when the Delta spike happened maybe two weeks before school started. We really were very strong at the Federal Department of Education, communicating that it is the responsibility of our superintendents and our Boards to protect our students and our staff, a safe working environment, a safe learning environment is critical. And we have worked closely with all states to make sure that that message is there, we supported our superintendents that are making decisions to protect students and staff, everyone wants our kids in schools. We all know the benefits of in-person learning, we have to leave public health to the experts. But I also understand we all want a day when masks are not required. But right now we know especially with Omicron, we have to do everything in our power to keep our children safe. And that's probably those mitigation strategies that the CDC recommends.

Mark Masselli:

Well, such an important pivot point in the pandemic, Margaret, getting America's children back to schools, and certainly Secretary Miguel Cardona played such an important role, as did another champion and close friend of ours,

Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, who joined us to discuss the Child Tax Credit, which did so much to address child poverty across the country.

Rosa DeLauro:

One of the things that was so critically important to me was the Child Tax Credit and the American Rescue Plan and look, it is the Child Tax Credit that I believe was addressing the issues of poverty. And you know, how poverty affects children, you know, whether it is their nutrition, their education, their health, their future, what happens in their homes, so that the Child Tax Credit, I believe, has met the need, and we got to continue to fight for it to be extended. And we've seen already that 50% of kids being lifted out of poverty in November, 2.8 million kids, that hunger numbers have declined, if I'm correct I think it's the largest single reduction in child poverty that we've seen in the United States. And that's been very powerful. The pandemic laid bare the deep inequities that exist in this country, we know the impact they have. And also, let us give a shout out to Dr. Cameron Webb, the White House Advisor for COVID-19 equity, he talked real truth to power about the efforts targeting inequity in America today.

Dr. Cameron Webb:

The vaccinations have been an absolute huge and game changing intervention in communities of color. In changing that trajectory of the differential mortality, what vaccines have done is they've really reduced those, that rate of mortality. And it's helped to level the playing field, if you will, because while we can't change all those upstream factors that put people at increased risk for severe outcomes. What we can do, is make sure that they have immunologic protection to prevent some of those worse outcomes. When you complement that with some of the therapeutic options, what we're able to do is really put together the pieces downstream to prevent folks from dying disproportionately. But that does not absolve us of the need to continue to work upstream to make it easier for communities that have historically been hard hit to navigate this and future pandemic.

Mark Masselli:

As the politics around pandemic reached a fever pitch. Dr. Anthony Fauci joined us again, Margaret, I think five times during the pandemic, we had him on many years earlier, talking about his important work that he had done on the HIV issue. But he was balancing his efforts as a White House Chief Science Advisor against the politically motivated threats to his own personal safety. And you know that this is just so unfair. I think he realizes the political environment that he's in. He admonished the political rhetoric, saying "now was not the time to fight each other, when we're all battling a more

dangerous foe.”

Dr. Anthony Fauci:

I think it's no secret Margaret, that we are now living in an environment of profound divisiveness in our country. And whenever you have something of the magnitude and impact of a global pandemic that has severely involved our country, with now approaching a million deaths, with a well over 930,000 deaths, we do see it and you can't walk away from it, a degree of political divisiveness and even hostility that cannot help when you're trying as a country in a unified way to respond to an outbreak. The common enemy is the virus, we should look at this metaphorically that we are at war with a common enemy. And when you're at war with a common enemy, it's not time or ever should be time of fighting with each other. We should be focusing all our efforts on containing this terribly devastating virus which has done such destruction throughout the world, including in our own country.

Margaret Flinter:

Well Mark, it has been truly shocking and so, so disappointing to see the level of attacks against some of the most revered members of the scientific community. And we do want to give a shout out and best wishes as the year comes to an end to Dr. Fauci on his retirement, May we all be as vigorously engaged in our work at 80 as Dr. Fauci has been. So, big thanks to him on behalf of the country. Meanwhile, some states really did do a pretty great job of addressing the pandemic. Dr. Mary Bassett was on the show, she has just been a rock star in the public health world, she took over as the State of New York's Health Commissioner, and she joins us to share their successful strategies for containing the pandemic and really had some powerful lessons to share.

Dr. Mary Bassett:

We have a lot of data here. And we have been contributing to the national conversation about vaccine protection. As you know, we have a wonderful group of data scientists who've been looking at the protectiveness of natural infection, meaning getting COVID and vaccination, we released information about the much more rapid rise of hospitalizations among children in the pediatric population. Even though these hospitalizations are rare. They were going up faster than the hospitalizations for other groups.

So, we have a lot of data. We also have wastewater data. We are collecting it now in five counties scattered strategically around the state, we have received funding to extend wastewater surveillance to the entire state. So, we're looking at our data. And I have not heard this about the CDC, we all look to the CDC, for you know, for data and for guidance. But

of course, it is true that during this pandemic states have occasionally had to make decisions that were out ahead of the CDC, New York State has done that, as have other states. And that's because we look at our data and tried to decide what's best for the people who live in our state.

Mark Masselli:

You know, as this global pandemic engulfed all of us, the world also watched in horror as Russia launched a war against neighboring Ukraine. We welcome several brave clinicians from inside Ukraine delivering care as Russian shells were pounding their cities. We first welcome family clinician, Dr. Kateryna Pochtar to the show, Margaret I think you remember, she would go back to her clinic and then hear the sirens and then go into the bomb shelters and just repeat that all, everyday -- What incredible heroes of health care workers in Ukraine are.

Dr. Kateryna Pochtar:

The houses are destroyed, hospitals are destroyed, kindergartens are destroyed. Compared with the Southern and Eastern part of Ukraine, Rivne is a safe place at the moment. Our Medical Center is safe. There is a bomb shelter in the ground floor. My colleagues and me keep doing our best to take care of our patients. Everyone is on his/her workplace. When we share an air alarm, we go downstairs to the bomb shelter. patients and medical staff are staying in the bomb shelter as long as it is needed. Then we come back to our offices and continue and again and again. We work hide, work, hide. My patients are scared. They are crying in my office. As for me, I'm not scared. But I'm worried about my family. I'm thinking about them all the time. My parents and my brother and his wife and little son are in small town, Enerhodar. There is a nuclear power plant there. The Russians are just on the entrance of this city. People are hiding, it's unbelievable—the nuclear power plant, it is so dangerous to attack this town, but anyway. My kids are with their grandmother in the village, also hiding. I can't see them. I can't talk to them, they need my love and support so much, but I'm so far.

Margaret Flinter:

I don't know that I've ever heard more powerful stories from health care workers and that feeling of duty and obligation to serve and continue to provide care. And a few weeks later, a very similar story from another family clinician inside Ukraine, Iryna Voloshina, who talked about what it's like to deliver care under siege and just the stress that it takes. Having your children cared for by other members of the family, not knowing what might happen. We remember the horrific incident of the maternity patients being moved to a safer location that was then bombed. I don't think any of us can

fully appreciate the incredible stress that these individuals, so brave, so committed were under.

Dr. Iryna Voloshina: Our moral state. I characterize like, quite strong. But I worry very much about my patients and about our doctors who are staying now in totally blocked and occupied territories. It is completely awful situation, there is humanitarian catastrophe, because people completely lost, even food.

Mark Masselli: You're right on, Margaret, such bravery, every day family clinicians dealing with the health needs of this devastated country under really frightening conditions.

Margaret Flinter: There's really no shortage of heroes, Mark, I think, as we've known over the years, and as we've often had the opportunity and the honor of having these guests on Conversations on Health Care, their story provides a backdrop to somebody who we have known and who we had admired for many years. And that was Dr. Paul Farmer, the late Dr. Paul Farmer, the founder of Partners in Health. He's been a guiding light for what we do and I think, shared our common ethic of if you want to see change in the world, you better go out and start building it. But he built a global standard for creating a robust community health system in some of the poorest places in the world. And not just building the delivery system, but also the training and the education of the community health workers and the nurses and the physicians, he will always be remembered. He passed away unexpectedly in the spring of 2022, his longtime Medical Director, Dr. Joia Mukherjee joined us to talk about Paul's enduring legacy

Dr. Joia Mukherjee: In accepting that inequality, that economic, social and racial inequality, you will never achieve health as a human right, and so what Paul challenges all of us to do, even in death is to treat every person as if you would your own family. You wouldn't say well, we have \$3, this is all we can do. In fact, I've seen impoverished people walk miles expend huge amount of resources, sell their own assets, home, animals, just to get care for a child. So the \$3 is never enough. And we should never think that we can provide health care as a human right without massively looking at these unequal structures. And Paul called that structural violence, and indeed, it is violent. And I think that is really his greatest contribution.

Margaret Flinter: Well, Mark, as we know, policy doesn't stop for pandemics or wars. But policy does amplify the need to put resources where they will do the most good. CMS Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, joined us to talk about the Biden administration's proposed health budget, which had a big

focus on improving our public health infrastructure and addressing the unprecedented mental health and addiction crises underway in the country today.

Chiquita Brooks-LaSure: We are so excited about this President's budget. As we all know, starting with mental health, the COVID 19 pandemic has just put such a strain on the mental health of Americans across the country. And all of us with children certainly know how much our nation's children have really suffered during this time period. And certainly, children who are in underserved communities are really at a crisis level. That's just the tip of the iceberg, and so as you hopefully are seeing, we have a department wide focus on mental health, really looking across all of the agencies to really see what we can do. And I would say about CMS in particular. Our focus has been, and is going to be on the programs we serve.

Mark Masselli: Meanwhile, politics were getting in the way of approval of more funding to fight the pandemic. Dr. Georges Benjamin of the American Public Health Association, decried the situation and how short sighted it was.

Dr. Georges Benjamin: People know where their money is. But public health has been so under valued and under supported, under financed for many years, that the money that did go out, billed one time capacity and that longtime capacity. And this new \$10 billion agreement is going to help a little bit more. But in many ways, it's really a drop in the bucket of what's needed to give every community the capacity and supports that we need, anytime a new health threat enters a community.

Margaret Flinter: And as we know Mark, the pandemic amplified this crisis of unmet mental health needs. It existed before, but it really was amplified. During the pandemic and well known advocate and TV journalist Jane Pauley joined us to share her own experience why she's dedicating her efforts to growing a community health center movement in her home state of Indiana, where mental health care is fully embedded in the primary care setting.

Jane Pauley: It has been a very important advocacy role. And I think one of the reasons that I was invited to share my name was because the first the Jane Pauley of community health clinics would have the behavioral health component, and that perhaps knowing my story would invite people to take advantage of those services. I've since learned that most people who take advantage of the services that Mark and his team offer don't know who Jane Pauley is or was. They're just glad that the clinics are there for their use when they need them.

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- Mark Masselli: Several other guests addressed our mental health crisis this past year, Dr. Tom Coderre of SAMHSA, the Department of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services at HHS.
- Dr. Tom Coderre: Let's just talk a little bit about harm reduction, because really, that approach is really all about saving lives. Harm reduction is proactive, and it's evidence based. It's to reduce the negative personal and public health impacts of any behaviors that are associated with alcohol and other substance use. And it's, as you pointed out a very important part of the Biden-Harris administration's comprehensive approach to addressing the crisis that we're in the middle of. Through the bringing prevention, treatment and recovery services to individuals where they are to help them work through their own goals, to help bring them across the Stages of Change.
- Margaret Flinter: Also, Dr. Thomas Insel, former longtime Director of the National Institute for Mental Health, joined us to talk about his new book on the subject Healing: Our Path From Mental Illness to Mental Health.
- Dr. Thomas Insel: It's outrageous that families take their adolescent to an emergency room, and they're told that they have to wait nine days or 12 days for a bed, and so their 17-year-old is chained to a gurney day and night for 12 days in the back of an emergency room. And that is happening every day across America. That is not acceptable, and so it's time for families to begin to say to people who represent them, "we're not going to put up with this". You know, I say in the book that we're sort of in the Jim Crow era of mental health care. I mean, this is just outrageously unjust. It's unethical. It's a painful immorality in this country. And yet, there's no reckoning until people are faced with it themselves. And then they're so overwhelmed by the crisis that they're in that they can't tell they can manage that, let alone become advocates for a social change.
- Mark Masselli: Former Trump, White House COVID advisor Dr. Deborah Birx, shared her inside story from her personal experience attempting to guide the previous administration, during the height of the pandemic.
- Dr. Deborah Birx: This is bigger than who's in the Oval Office, certainly who's in the Oval Office can really impact communications and communications is critical. So, I don't want to make light of that I talk about in the book a lot. The mishandling of communications by the Trump-White House calls significant issues on the ground and caused amazing confusion among the American people, and so that has to be fixed and there has

to be consistency there. But we also have to have a safety net that says every American ought to be able to see the data themselves.

Margaret Flinter:

That was fascinating, reflecting back on all the many times that we saw her on the news. We also welcomed an author and science writer at The Atlantic, Ed Yong, who won this year's Pulitzer Prize for the remarkable coverage that he provided around the pandemic.

Ed Yong:

Both the administration have gone very hard on this very individualistic stance on the pandemic, this idea that we're going to -- As I've said already, use biomedical countermeasures, pharmaceutical interventions to get our way out of this without having to put in the work of building up the social support. And the other kinds of measures, things like masking, ventilations, testing, all the rest that would protect the health of the population at large. Both have failed in their own specific ways to really shore up public health at a time we really need it. And I think that, you know, again, Trump was deeply problematic and wrong in his approach to the pandemic. But I think if the only lesson we learned from these two plus years is -- it was all on Trump. I think we've absolutely learned the wrong lesson. The problem was in the rootstock. The problems are foundational and longstanding and fundamental.

Mark Masselli:

Well, in my rethinking of suffering another tragic mass shooting at another elementary school this time in Uvalde, Texas, Florida teacher Sarah Lerner joined us to talk about her experience surviving the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. She is part of a national organization of teachers seeking legislation to address America's gun violence epidemic.

Sarah Lerner:

We are working to make communities and schools safer, because we know it's not just school shootings or gun violence in school, it's gun violence in communities of color. It's suicide by gun violence, its domestic violence, and it all finds its way into school, because it's the baggage and the trauma that these kids carry with them, or that you as the educator carry with you.

Margaret Flinter:

And of course, in this month of December, the Sandy Hook massacre in Connecticut, the Sandy Hook School shootings, has just marked its 10th anniversary. And I think people in Connecticut will probably never fully recover from that any more than they will in the other States. So, much work to do. Our children just deserve better from us, as do their teachers and administrators.

Mark Masselli: Yeah, they certainly do. We did enjoy a bright spot. This year, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the start of our own organization, Community Health Center, Incorporated. We've watched it grow from a Free Walk-In Clinic run by activist and volunteers back in 1972, to you know, world class national organization, helping to transform the way primary care is delivered.

Margaret Flinter: Hopefully it hasn't lost a bit of that youthful spirit, but nice opportunity to see how far we've come and the dramatic changes that have occurred in American health care over the years.

Mark Masselli: And how far we still have to go, Margaret. Next week we'll continue our look back at this year's many memorable guest we've welcomed here at Conversations on Health Care including a billionaire entrepreneur attempting to disrupt America's costly prescription drug market, epidemiologists who helped eradicate smallpox and a farewell visit from Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Margaret Flinter: What a year! And you can learn more about Conversations on Health Care by going to www.chcradio.com. We want to thank you for being part of this experience. Joining us and welcoming some of the great thinkers in health policy, in public health and pandemics, and the transformation of care. We appreciate you very much. Happy holidays to everybody.

Mark Masselli: Happy holidays, and peace and health. I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and health.

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Marianne O'Hare: Conversations on Health Care is recorded in the Knowledge and Technology Center Studios in Middleton, Connecticut, and is brought to you by the Community Health Center. Now celebrating 50 years of providing quality care to the underserved, where health care is a right, not a privilege, www.chc1.com and www.chcradio.com.

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