

CDC Leadership Profile: Meet Richard Besser

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As part of our series of leadership profiles, we continue with a profile of Richard Besser, MD, Director, COTPER. (Go to [The Inside Story](#) and select Category/Leadership Profiles to read earlier profiles in this series.)

Name: Richard Besser, MD

Title: Director, Coordinating Office for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response. (His first day on the job was August 29, two hours before Hurricane Katrina hit.)

Responsibilities: "COTPER has overall responsibility for coordinating CDC's preparedness activities. As Hurricane Katrina has demonstrated, preparedness is essential for all hazards, from terrorism to natural events."

First Job at CDC: In 1991, Besser was an EIS officer in the Enteric Diseases Branch, Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, NCID. "My first mission was in November, 1991, an outbreak of hemolytic uremic syndrome in Boston. I was able to link the cases to *E. coli* O157:H7 transmitted from unpasteurized apple cider. It was the first documented outbreak of this disease from this pathogen in cider. But that wasn't the highlight of that mission for me. I was in Boston for three months and I met my wife there. I am probably the only EIS officer to go out on an outbreak and come back with a spouse! We were profiled on a TV show called Vital Signs, where they reenacted the outbreak and how it led to our romance. That was a lot of fun!"

Another EIS highlight he recalls was being part of the team to help control the cholera pandemic in Central and South America. "I worked on investigating an outbreak that came in on an airliner. One hundred people were infected. Our investigation highlighted the lack of preparedness of the medical community for recognizing and treating this disease, although cholera was rampant in parts of South America. It really brought home for me the importance of preparedness for this sort of natural event, given how easily infectious diseases can be introduced from any part of the world."

Path to Public Health: "I became drawn to public health through an interest in international health. After college, I spent a year traveling around the world, primarily in Southern and Southeast Asia, and became sensitized to the enormity of global health disparities. I went to medical school with the full expectation that I would pursue a career in International Health. Following my pediatric residency I took a job in Dhaka, Bangladesh, at the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research, working on a polio vaccine study, and getting intensive experience in the management of diarrheal diseases including cholera. It is also where I heard about the EIS program, spending time with an EIS officer performing a rapid health assessment in a refugee camp. I completed my

chief residency in pediatrics and then came to CDC for the EIS program.

"Following EIS, I spent five years in Southern California, as residency director in Pediatrics at the University of California - San Diego and working on pediatric tuberculosis control for the county health department. Although this was a wonderful time in my life, I missed CDC and the opportunity to work at a national level on public health issues.

"One of the highlights of my career was being the founder and medical director of *Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work*, a program promoting the appropriate use of antibiotics. This program works through partners to change the way in which these essential drugs are used, hopefully reducing the spread of antimicrobial resistance. Through this work I have learned the importance of partnership, teamwork, and accountability. We have been able to document a 40% decline in antibiotic use for children over the past decade. While this is not directly attributable to our campaign, it does demonstrate the ability of well-designed public health programs to change practice."

Last book(s) read: "I read a lot for pleasure, mainly new fiction. My favorite book from this summer was *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. It is set in New York during the aftermath of the World Trade Center collapse and is written from the perspective of a 9-year-old boy who lost his father. The author is able to capture the sense of loss and longing in a voice that rings true.

"I also enjoyed *A Fine Balance*, by Rohinton Mistry, which is set in India in the 1970's, during the state of emergency. It's about issues of class and power."

Family: "I am married to Jeanne Besser. She is a food writer at the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. She just published her third cookbook entitled *The 5:30 Challenge* and is based on one of her weekly columns. We have two children: Alex, 10, and Jack, 7, who attend Fernbank Elementary. As a family we love baseball and are big Braves fans. I'm also an avid tennis player."

What are the top priorities you are working on? "COTPER has the enormous responsibility for ensuring that we are prepared for public health emergencies, be they natural or intentional. Preparedness is a continuum rather than a state of being. We need to work to improve our ability to measure our state of preparedness and determine where gaps lie so that we can continually improve our ability to prevent, respond to, and recover from these events.

"I want to ensure accountability. The American people have given CDC an enormous amount of resources to address preparedness. It is our responsibility to use these resources in the most appropriate manner and to be able to demonstrate improvements in our preparedness and response capabilities."

A second priority, he says "is to continue to improve the integration of public health science in the work we do. It is essential that the projects that we fund are based on the best public health available and address identified gaps in preparedness. I see it as a major priority to strengthen the bridges between CDC's science and programmatic activities."

He says starting work on the day Hurricane Katrina hit really put things in perspective. "Coming on board with COTPER at the beginning of a crisis let me see our strengths and gaps as well as the enormous talent across the agency. As an agency, CDC really stepped up to the plate in working with federal, state, and local partners to face a disaster on an unprecedented scale in this country. We must now make sure to learn from this experience to improve our preparedness and response for future emergencies."