

## A Global View of Public Health

As president of an international nonprofit that fights avoidable blindness, Barbara DeBuono '76, '80M (MD) takes on a new mission in public health.

By Husna Haq

**BARBARA DEBUONO** '76, '80M (MD) CREDITS literature with sparking her lifelong interest in medicine and public health.

She was just 14 when she read *Microbe Hunters*, the Paul de Kruif classic detailing science's advances against infectious diseases over the previous several centuries.

"It was such a great book, I thought, 'Wow, I want to save the world,'" says DeBuono. "That started me on my journey toward public health and medicine."

DeBuono's latest stop on that three-decade journey is her role as president and CEO of ORBIS International, a world-

A biology major at Rochester, DeBuono earned her MD from the School of Medicine and Dentistry, followed by a master's in public health from Harvard University. Specializing in infectious disease and epidemiology, she's built a three-decade career in both the public and private sectors.

Her leadership positions include appointments as director of health of the state of Rhode Island, where she established a comprehensive breast cancer-screening program and authored AIDS legislation. She also served as the commissioner of health for New York state under Gov. George Pataki, where she shaped a health care reform agenda that included develop-

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wide nonprofit organization that supports hands-on public health education and training for local ophthalmologists in more than 85 countries. Based in New York City, the organization and its global commitment are symbolized by its state-of-the-art Flying Eye Hospital and through its permanent country offices in Bangladesh, China, Ethiopia, India, Vietnam, and South Africa.

"What interested me was its mission, the idea of working in the developing world to address blindness," says DeBuono. "I frankly didn't know anything about eye health, and this gave me the opportunity to learn something completely new and different, and to work on a global level, with an NGO with an interesting mission."

ing the state's Medicaid managed care program and implementing the Child Health Insurance Program.

In the private sector, she has served as chief executive at the New York Presbyterian Healthcare Network, executive director of public health and government at Pfizer, and chief medical officer and global director of public health and social marketing at Porter Novelli.

Her work as a physician and public health professional has been guided by another important lesson learned from literature. In high school, DeBuono read Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, a play about a doctor who discovers that the baths in his coastal Norwegian town are being contami-



nated by a nearby tannery. When he tries to persuade the town to close the baths, a source of pride and tourism, the doctor is denounced as a lunatic.

"That was very powerful and I've learned a tremendous amount from reading it," says DeBuono. She adds that a central tenet of public health is not simply determining appropriate actions, but taking into consideration your audience, environment, and politics to most effectively communicate information and influence change.



**WORLDWIDE APPROACH:**  
As president and CEO of ORBIS International, DeBuono oversees an organization that helps treat and prevent blindness in more than 85 countries.

“I am a public health physician at heart,” DeBuono says. “I’m one of those people who likes to roll up my sleeves and solve problems, and at the end of the day come up with solutions that work, that make a difference, and that have an impact. That is what has always motivated me.”

Her sister, Lauren DeBuono, an attorney and business executive who has worked with DeBuono to establish the MAIA Foundation—a public charity that strives to improve the health and health literacy of

women in sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on reducing maternal mortality—says her sister “has been very driven, persistent, and focused from a relatively early age.”

DeBuono has traveled to Uganda and Rwanda for MAIA and to Africa and Asia with ORBIS. In February, she plans to travel to the Philippines for the first time with the Flying Eye Hospital and its volunteer faculty.

“It’s good to get out and actually roll up your sleeves and see what’s going on

firsthand,” she says. “You understand so much more about what’s the right strategy to approach a public health issue if you get out there and embed yourself in the environment.”

It’s a lesson she learned in the pages of Ibsen, and one she’s taken to heart ever since. **R**

*Husna Haq is a Rochester-based freelance writer. For more about ORBIS, visit [www.orbis.org](http://www.orbis.org); for the MAIA Foundation, visit [www.themaiafoundation.org](http://www.themaiafoundation.org).*