

Q&A

The Doctor Is in the House

The emails and phone calls come at all hours, and from all corners of the globe. Workers and managers ask about mask mandates, social distancing, and a host of other safety protocols that have emerged in the age of the pandemic. But the most pressing issue lately has been vaccines. She is asked: Will the shots make me sick? Were they rushed out too fast? And is it legal to make them a condition of employment?

Once outsourced at most non-health firms, the role of chief medical officer is quickly becoming mission critical.

We hear from Dr. Claudia Coplein, the first CMO at Tyson Foods.



Q&A

“They have questions, they have concerns,” says Dr. Claudia Coplein, the chief medical officer at Tyson Foods, Inc. “Some of them want more information. Some just want somebody to listen to them.”

This kind of hand-holding by a high-level executive is rare, but so is the title and job that Coplein holds. To be sure, healthcare-related companies have long had chief medical officers or the equivalent to oversee their health products and some employee issues. But the pandemic has created a new need for a top-level medical leader at firms in a whole range of sectors, from food to investment banking. With COVID-19 still very much a concern, these CMOs, as they are known, find themselves thrust into key decision-making seats and national prominence as they try to guide firms through the pandemic and then into employee wellness programs that are expanding rapidly. “The adage you hear is that every company is a healthcare company now,” says Mahek Shah, MD, until recently the executive director of value-based care at Harvard Business School. “If they didn’t have a CMO before, they definitely want one now.”

For her part, Coplein arrived at Tyson, the United States’ largest meat-processing company, at an especially difficult time, with the company facing employee lawsuits over health and safety standards at some of its plants from the early days of the pandemic. A former flight surgeon in the Air Force, she had spent the past two decades at major companies overseeing employee health, wellness programs, and benefit plans. Coplein was asked, according to a Tyson press release, to “assist the company’s efforts to protect team members during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also working to expand and promote a culture of health, safety, and wellness.”

Exactly how she would do that—in a role not universally defined at most firms—was still to be determined, but Coplein says she enjoyed “jumping into a fire, yet feeling very welcomed.” She sat down with *Briefings* to offer a glimpse into her world.

Chief medical officer duties were largely outsourced at many big firms. Why is that changing?

For the last 20 months, there have been decisions that have to be made, and guidance needed, on almost a daily basis. It’s difficult to rely on outside resources that don’t necessarily have a foot inside the company and understand its culture, benefits, and work environments. Hence, the need by a lot of companies to create a more permanent, fixed role to advise the C-suite.

What happened when the pandemic hit and most companies did not have CMOs?

Companies had to make many health and safety decisions based

on what was in the news. Things were changing rapidly, with a lot of unknowns, and they were struggling to find the internal resources who had public health expertise to guide them. The outsourcing of occupational health and medical leadership work really became a big issue, which prompted some companies to create this position.

Right before the pandemic was declared, you were VP and CMO at an insurance company. What was that like?

We had employees in Asia, and others that traveled to Asia. When we learned about this new virus that was affecting people in China, we pulled out our influenza pandemic plan, which was a starting point. But as most companies found out, it didn’t necessarily cover the impact of a huge global pandemic caused by a previously unknown illness. By mid-January, we had a team meeting regularly and were strategizing about the potential for the virus to spread beyond China.

Why did you depart?

My departure had been planned, and I was looking forward to spending some time traveling overseas. My last day in the office was on March 11. Two days later, a national emergency was declared in the US, and many businesses and schools shut down and sent everybody home. A week later I got a call from a CEO of a manufacturing company, asking if I could provide some guidance on how they could operate while keeping the employees safe, and that led to another consulting project. Soon I was consulting with several companies.

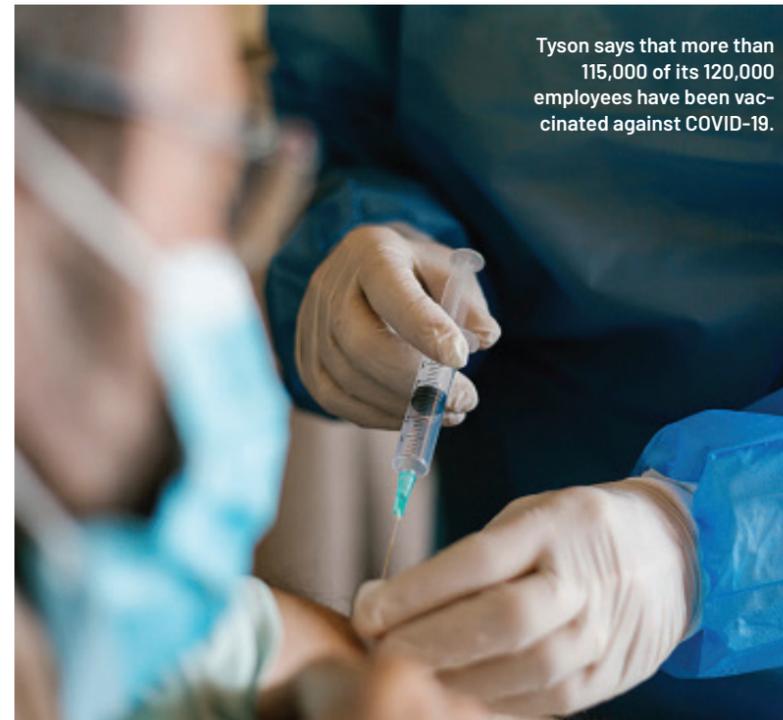
So much for traveling. You ended up at Tyson in the middle of the storm, following some high-profile COVID outbreaks. What was that like?

It was both jumping into a fire, yet feeling very welcomed. I don’t think I’ve ever felt more appreciated at an organization. Tyson had been in the news quite a bit, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, when no one really knew how COVID-19 was transmitted and prevented. Tyson responded in the best way it could, brought in outside medical consultants, and put significant mitigation protocols in place, including a really robust testing program that identified cases and prevented further spread. I think joining at that point [January 2021] was good timing, because vaccines would soon become available, and the company was looking for guidance on the path forward.

How did you decide to make yourself personally available to employees, with late-night calls and all?

We provided information about the vaccines in many different

languages so that our team members had the resources needed to make their decision. We had a broad campaign that included company-wide Q&As and team talks, panel events, group conversations at the local level, and a hotline that team members



Tyson says that more than 115,000 of its 120,000 employees have been vaccinated against COVID-19.

could call with questions. As we got further along on our vaccination journey, we shifted to smaller group meetings at our plants, which offered a way for people to share their story about why they had chosen to get vaccinated. We also recognized that some people wanted more personal conversations to have their questions answered. Our local plant leaders, occupational health nurses, and safety and HR professionals have all done a great job with this, but sometimes a team member needs an additional person to talk to. And I’ve made myself available, mostly because I feel like the CMO is uniquely suited to listen, answer questions, help filter misinformation, and address individual concerns about the vaccines.

What percentage of your time was spent on COVID before the delta-variant surge and Tyson’s decision to mandate vaccination?

When I first joined, perhaps 60 percent COVID and 40 percent

other things like occupational health, benefits, the opening of seven primary-care clinics, and our culture of health work. But when we announced in early August that vaccination against COVID-19 would become a condition of employment for all of our US team members, it became perhaps 90 percent of my role.

Who do you make decisions with?

Our “COVID Fighters” team meets daily. It includes people from health and safety, HR, legal, occupational health, communications, and others as needed. It’s really cross-functional collaboration. We look at our vaccination rates, our case rates, any trends in individual communities, and what decisions or changes the CDC, OSHA, or FDA may have coming up. We address current issues and strategize about future plans. That process has worked well, so nothing really falls through the cracks. There are representatives at all of our facilities who are designated to oversee that location’s COVID plan, and we meet weekly with those people. We also work closely with the communications team on messaging—we have over 40 languages spoken here just in the US, so we translate all our materials.

What was the response when you mandated vaccines at Tyson, weeks before President Biden’s mandate?

We went from a less than 50 percent vaccination rate to more than 96 percent as of our November 1 deadline. We realized there were several populations of employees throughout this process: First there were those who were excited about the vaccines, though maybe a little anxious. Most of them were vaccinated in our first wave of efforts. Then there were people who were on the fence, perhaps not really having a reason to get vaccinated because there hadn’t been many cases of COVID in their community. Most of these team members did get vaccinated shortly after the requirement was announced. Then there was a population that needed more information, had concerns, or in some cases had misinformation. That’s where I’ve spent a significant amount of time, just listening and answering questions.

What’s on your agenda for 2022?

I’ve really spent a lot of time helping to stabilize the organization during uncertain times. I’m proud of our 140,000 team members who have worked so hard throughout all of this. Hopefully 2022 will allow me time to focus on the overall well-being of our employees, everything from evolving our internal culture of well-being to enhancing our mental health support, assessing our benefits, and becoming much more engaged in the overall employee experience—not just healthcare, but in really helping people to thrive at Tyson. ■