

# Dr. Rishi Manchanda

President and CEO, Health Begins

*Dr. Rishi Manchanda is a physician, author, and healthcare leader who has spent more than a decade developing novel strategies to improve health in resource-poor communities. In his 2013 TEDbook, *The Upstream Doctors*, he introduced a new model of healthcare workers who improve care by addressing patients' health-related social needs, like food, financial and housing insecurity. The book has become recommended reading in medical schools and universities across the world.*

*Dr. Manchanda is President of HealthBegins, a social enterprise that provides healthcare professionals and community partners with tools to improve care and the social factors that make people sick in the first place. Health Begins runs learning collaborations across the country with national and state-level partners, including the American Physicians Group. The advocacy work centers around their moonshot goal to train 25,000 "upstreamists" by the end of next year in partnership with physicians and community-based professionals.*

## **Necessary Optimism to Work Upstream**

Dr. Rishi Manchanda, president and CEO of Health Begins, went into medicine with a clear understanding of the social determinants of health and a personal mission to affect the communities he has served, from south central Los Angeles to the VA and migrant farmers in the mid-valley of California. Optimism is not a naïve sense of what is possible, it is a necessary sensibility that exists in all of us to take collective action. We can be optimistic with rigor as we ask ourselves, "If not this, what?"

## **Recognizing Rot in the Foundation**

Rishi notes that we, as a country, have shifted the national conversation on racism away from an individual level and are now speaking to it as an institutional one. We need to talk about the fact that the foundation of our country is

rotted. A study comparing the health of Americans to other first-world countries shows how far behind we are in both general health and length of life. One outcome of the report is the acknowledgement that the fundamental inequity of health services in our country impacts all Americans. Access to healthcare, food, and housing must become a common experience. This will require us to dismantle the foundation. Not everyone will participate, but Rishi believes that more people will take part in the dismantling than ever before. Until we do this, the impact will be seen at all points in society—business success and talent access, education performance—and leave us all at a disadvantage.

## **An Approach to Solutions: Private Industry**

In identifying ways to dismantle the rotted foundation, Rishi has suggestions for private industry. First, look inward and by race. Understanding what employees/vendors/partners/consumers of color need is fundamental. For example, analyze the design of benefit plans by race and understand what each group is choosing. With this information, take an anti-racist approach to reviewing the data. This means centering in the margins to address issues. In the case of benefit plans, look at what is best for this group of employees. Look at new models that are more equitable, such as a wage-based approach. Finally, private industry must demand more government action. There are non-partisan, legal ways to do this. The pandemic revealed that the government is not there for them in the ways they may have assumed, so they need to take civic action—from giving employees the day off to speaking out about dismantling the Fair Housing Act.

## **An Approach to Solutions: Collaborations**

Rishi believes there are a lot of collective impact models that work, and suggests the following steps. First, define a set of shared goals by place, not by people. For example, have a goal to eliminate race disparities in cancer treatment access

in five specific zip codes by 2023. This framing changes the focus away from the individual to a physical place. Second, identify shared accountability. If we don't do a good job, then what happens? Who is holding us accountable? There are frameworks out there (e.g., a results-based accountability method) that do this well. Finally, align incentives. The goal maps to a specific set of incentives that are financial or social (e.g., tax savings and recognition).

### **The Flip Approach**

One idea Rishi suggests is leveraging the model of a political campaign or PAC and work to flip a community. This approach raises money, garners location attention, and, with that, applies pressure to move a community to change. What if we did this in 100 communities in the U.S.—finding the gap, and mobilizing, organizing, and pooling funds to address such issues as asthma and air pollution, and infant mortality rates? Imagine a phone or text bank asking, “Would you help save the lives of 1,000 black children in this community?”