

On a daily basis, the powerful possibility of protecting and improving community health at the policy level is what motivates Andrew S. Doniger, M.D., M.P.H., the 2011 Edward Mott Moore physician honoree. During his 20 year tenure as Director of the Monroe County Department of Health, Dr. Doniger has addressed numerous issues, including tobacco control, obesity, early childhood intervention, immunization and HIV/AIDS. As a result of his commitment and dedication, the overall public health of Monroe County has improved.

"I think I have the most interesting job in the community. I have the opportunity to work on things that have the ability to really create change. It is a very satisfying experience," said Dr. Doniger.

A career in public health was not always the goal of the Nanuet Public High School class valedictorian who holds an undergraduate degree from Amherst College. After earning his medical degree, Dr. Doniger traveled westward to do a pediatric internship and residency at the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. But his focus shifted after engaging in a lengthy predawn conversation with a surgeon who was raised on a mission in Kenya. Dr. Doniger was intrigued. Six months later, he was on a plane headed to Kenya.

Arriving for his first day of service at Friends Mission Hospital in Kenya, Dr. Doniger discovered that the doctor who had been running the hospital had fled the country that morning. So, with the help of three well-trained physician assistants, he began tending to all of the inpatient and outpatient needs of the rural African community. While there, he encountered some of the first cases of a new, fatal wasting disease. Later linked to HIV/AIDS, the condition at the time was known locally as slim disease, because the victims became very ill and lost weight rapidly. Although the work was challenging, the experience piqued his interest in public health.

"I learned what it meant to a community to have a safe water supply and how to run an immunization drive, making sure the vaccines were protected from getting too warm," said Dr. Doniger. "I also saw that the best experts in a community are the people who live in the community."

Dr. Doniger returned to the United States and enrolled in the School of Public Health at the University of California at Berkley, earning a master's degree. He began his Preventive Medicine Residency in the California Department of Public Health in Sacramento in 1981, about the same time that a disease that became known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first being identified. Dr. Doniger watched the governmental response to this new public health threat, as activists pressured the health direc-



**Andrew S. Doniger,
M.D., M.P.H.**

tor to educate people about AIDS transmission and demanded closure of bathhouses – a move that drew protests from others in the community. He realized that good intentions alone do not always make for effective public health policy.

"Public health requires careful gauging of what the public is ready for. You can make a strong logical argument for policies, but if that argument doesn't include whether or not the public is ready to accept it, the policy won't go anywhere," said Dr. Doniger.

With experience, Dr. Doniger has demonstrated his skill in balancing individual freedoms with public welfare and ability to monitor support for change. He worked to pass Monroe County's smoking ban in restaurants and workplaces, one of the first

such laws to be passed in the country. In addition, Dr. Doniger has guided policy initiatives to increase immunization rates; secured millions of dollars in state and federal funding for lead paint prevention efforts and become a recognized national leader in emergency preparedness.

Recent alarming statistics on the HIV epidemic, which revealed that nearly half of all new cases of HIV in last year in Monroe County occurred in young people under the age of 25, have again put Dr. Doniger in the spotlight. The health department has advocated for increased testing and education. Dr. Doniger took it one step further, presenting the idea of having condoms available in city schools to the Rochester City School Board.

"When a disease such as HIV affects children, the need to act is greater," he said.

Dr. Doniger's hard work has not gone unnoticed. He has been recognized by a number of agencies, including the National Association of Child Advocates and the American Medical Association.

In addition, he has given back to the community beyond his professional roles, serving as a leader in a number of organizations, including the United Way of Greater Rochester, Monroe County Early Learning Council, the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency and the New York State Pediatric Advisory Committee.

From the vantage point of a career in public health, Dr. Doniger is grateful for the opportunity to impact the healthfulness of many

"One of the things you have to decide when going into public health is if you are willing to give up your opportunities to persuade people one at a time," he said "Public health is about trying to get everyone working on the same page so you can actually measure a change over a period of time. If you are able to meet the challenge of getting everyone's focus in the same place you can move the needle."