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WOMEN LEADERS

Margaret A. Chesney, PhD

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Strong leaders know their "true north," says Margaret A. Chesney, PhD. "It's important for all of us to think about what we really want to contribute," she explains. "What do you believe in? What are your values? Answer those questions and that becomes your compass." This concept of an internal compass has guided Chesney throughout her life.

Her own true north is promoting health and preventing disease, which Chesney discovered when she visited the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center as an undergraduate and saw patients in a behavioral treatment group for alcoholism.

"It immediately struck me that this was what I had to do," she recalls. "I didn't know the specific route I would take to achieve my goal, but my direction was clear."

So, after graduating summa cum laude from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., Chesney earned her master's and doctoral degrees in clinical and counseling psychology from Colorado State University.

Since then, Chesney has conducted research on the relationship between behavior and chronic disease, particularly in identifying the specific behavioral factors associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, such as stress, and developing psychosocial interventions to address those factors.

Chesney's career turned from the theoretical to the applied in 1985 when Thomas J. Coates, PhD, at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), asked her to join him in developing behavioral interventions to curb the burgeoning AIDS epidemic.

"I consulted my internal compass and thought, 'I've got to do this,'" says Chesney. She joined UCSF, and became a professor of medicine and epidemiology at the School of Medicine and co-director of the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies. Working with Susan Folkman, PhD, her research turned to interventions to increase positive well-being and enhance resilience and quality of life while coping with chronic conditions.

After a stint as a senior visiting scientist in the Office of Research on Women's Health at the National Institutes of Health, she was tapped to be the first deputy director of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). With the center's director, Chesney guided the center's extramural research program, which includes research, investigator-initiated projects, contracts, fellowships, and training and career awards. In Fiscal Year 2006, NCCAM's overall budget was \$123 million.

As Chesney continues on her journey, she predicts, "Health and medicine will become more integrative and focus more on wellness—this is something I look forward to seeing!"

—S. Martin

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