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Regi's 'Innovating in Healthcare' Cases: What Makes for a Successful Woman Entrepreneur in Healthcare? Epic, Cleave, and Close Concerns

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Abstract

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The three women CEOs of the healthcare case studies highlighted in this issue of HMPI (see below), had one thing in common: **they were gutsy.** Each saw a critical gap in the healthcare system and built something to address it.

Smart, strategic, tough. No Spanx, makeup, cooking, or clothing firms for them. There's nothing wrong with traditional women entrepreneur routes; but these three women wanted to change the world, so they did what the big boys did: IT, wellness, and, get this, biotech– arguably the most complex and capital-intensive sector in healthcare innovation [1].

These women ignored the barriers that stymie most healthcare entrepreneurs: a powerful, consolidated status quo that blocks the innovators that threaten it; a bureaucratic and politicized third-party financing system; tough governmental requirements; islands of information, each with their own language, that impede outcomes accountability; powerful rival technologies; and fickle consumers who, unaware that their taxes and income pay for all of healthcare, demand that any healthcare innovation should be free. They never questioned their ability to build healthcare companies that did good—by controlling costs, expanding access, and improving quality.

And they did well. Did they ever.

One of those three is Judy Faulkner, the genius entrepreneur who started EPIC [2]. The dominant Electronic Medical Record firm in the United States, Epic was launched in 1979 by Judy with just $70,000 of seed capital from family, friends, and early colleagues. Faulkner grew the company from that point without any outside investment or acquisitions, , creating her own world on her own terms. When Epic built their “Intergalactic Campus” in Verona, Wisconsin back in the early 2000s, Judy encountered a surprising problem: the underground parking garages could not accommodate the local fire trucks. Rather than accept the mismatch, she worked with the city to build a new, smaller fire engine and donated it to the Verona Fire Department., When the campus opened, Judy came riding through on the new truck with her white Samoyed dog, McKinley, taped with black paper dots to resemble a Dalmatian. You have to love this woman: smart, and a lot of fun, too [3].

Just as iconoclastic is Amy Burroughs, who captained the Dartmouth women’s rugby team, Elegant Violence Inc., some 30 years ago while a student at Dartmouth College. After starting a small business in high school and programming for the CIA, she followed a conventional route only when she started working in brand management and became one of my Harvard Business School students. I knew almost immediately that she not only would become a Baker Scholar (top 5% of the class — very rare for a woman, especially in 1997 , but also, and much more difficult, that she would build a successful career. She joined Genentech and then moved into working with biotech startups and even did a tour in executive recruiting.

Burroughs eventually wound up at Cleave, a firm with a drug in testing to combat multiple myeloma but that had a serious side effect: blindness in some patients [4]. Who would want to

take on that kind of challenge and head this firm? Well, Amy became the CEO, solved the blindness issue, and did it on a budget that felt like $3.50 cents in the wildly costly biotech world. And then she sold the company's assets in 2023. Today, she is the CEO of Terns Pharmaceuticals, a publicly owned firm developing important new therapies for cancer and obesity.

Kelly Close has a different approach from Burroughs and Faulkner. Mild and self-spoken, she is a lioness at heart [5]. Close is a childhood diabetic who told her investment banking boss to go fly a kite when he refused to let her work remotely on the weekends while she cared for her ailing father. I believed in her, too, when she was my student in 1995 ; I know a lioness when I see one, even if she looks like a lamb.

In 2002, Kelly Close founded Close Concerns, a diabetes-focused healthcare information company, with her husband. The venture was entirely self-funded, launched with a lean and profitable model centered on subscription-based newsletters and consulting services for companies and organizations in diabetes care. Kelly personally handled both sales and strategy in the early days, and soon after, created a distinctive full-time and summer associates program that attracted undergraduates eager to work on meaningful problems in healthcare. The program became a launchpad for top medical and business schools—and a draw for high-performing students who wanted to travel the world to scientific conferences, gain mentorship, and contribute to work that mattered. It was a brilliant business model, and a brilliant success.

Simple Lesson: Believe in Yourself. Not so Simple: Making It Happen

Like all management bromides, 'believe in yourself' is easy to say. But you had better be good. All three women are fantastic, substantively and strategically. They know their IT, pharma, medical conditions. They are also extremely competent businesspeople: sneaky with their market strategies, brilliant with customer acquisitions, creative in scaling strategies, with a profound knowledge of finance. They know that success comes to she who works hard.

I cannot teach anybody how to be gutsy (although, as a personal aside, poverty helps. You have no way to go but up.)

But, with these case studies featured in this issue of HMPI, and many others, I can teach you

how to align with the factors that block most entrepreneurs. And, I can help you to evaluate, start, scale and exit your healthcare innovation. Read our new book, *Innovating in Healthcare: Text and Cases* (HBS publishing, 2026), and tell me what you think.

References

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Epic

Cleave Therapeutics

Close Concerns