address: “Individuals use knowledge to structure their everyday experience and generate health-promoting behaviors. People wash their hands because of knowledge about microbial transmission of disease. People change the most intimate parts of their sexual behavior because of knowledge about the way AIDS and other STDs are transmitted. People quit smoking because of the knowledge that smoking actually kills you.”

Frenk’s father and grandfather—a Jew who fled Nazi Germany—were both physicians. In fact, Frenk represents the fourth generation of physicians in his family. He saw patients briefly after completing medical school at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, but quickly realized that he was more interested in considering society as a patient. He arrives at Harvard with experience not only in Mexico, but at WHO, where he was executive director of evidence and information for policy. He is also a member of the Institute of Medicine and has served as a senior fellow in global health and in sociology, and a Ph.D. in medical-care organization and sociology.

An opera fan, Frenk is the third of seven children whose careers divided roughly evenly between music (their mother is a concert pianist) and science and medicine (their father’s domain). The Mexico City native was almost born in Boston: his father—a concert pianist and science and medicine native—was almost born in Boston; and coincidentally, the lab where their father worked was in an HSPH building. Now he is himself the father of four, and the author of two children’s books explaining the functions of the human body. His wife, economist Felicia Marie Knaul, Ph.D. ’95, has held senior government posts in Mexico and Colombia; most recently, she worked for the Mexican Health Foundation.

Frenk voices excitement at taking the helm of HSPH at a time when public health is coming into its own, with disciplines from economics to security studies recognizing its importance. “We know today that investing in health is the best way to create prosperity and security for everyone,” he said in a December panel discussion at the Harvard Kennedy School. He adds: “Living in a world where children die unnecessarily, or women die while giving birth—this is what sows the seeds of resentment.”

Health’s relevance across disciplines makes HSPH a perfect candidate, he says, for a move to Allston, where it would be closer to the schools of business and government, and possibly a relocated school of education. But with Allston plans under review given the steep decline in the Harvard endowment (see pages 42-43), such a move is uncertain. In the near term, Frenk says, the school is going ahead with some long-postponed renovations and trying to consolidate (its offices and labs currently span 27 separate buildings). But he is hopeful that the school will make the move eventually, while keeping a foothold in Longwood for proximity to Harvard Medical School.

Compared to other Harvard faculties, HSPH has been somewhat insulated from the financial crisis: a decline in the endowment distribution pinches less, because HSPH gets the lowest percentage of its operating budget from that source—13 percent in fiscal 2008 (see “Harder Times,” January-February, page 47). And, Frenk notes, the school is in a good position when it comes to federal funding (its principal source of revenue), with no large grants coming to an end soon.

He vows that the school will not pull back on financial aid for its thoroughly international student body (one-third of the students are foreign citizens, representing 50 countries in all). He aims to create more financial support for junior faculty, including funds to incubate research ideas that don’t fall within the guidelines for federal grants. And, Frenk says resolutely, “We have no plans of laying off personnel. We are not contemplating any drastic measures.”

Another endeavor that is proceeding: hiring a new director for HIGH. Given the obvious relevance of this interfaculty initiative to HSPH concerns, and the fact that the new leader will have a faculty appointment through HSPH, the search had been suspended; in January, it was well under way—a good thing, Frenk says,