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Acting NIH Director Assures Agency is 'Fine' But ACD Member Fears 'Broken' Nomination Process

By Theresa Defino

With no hints as to when the White House will nominate a new NIH leader, Larry Tabak, acting NIH director, recently took pains to share with his top advisory committee—and the world at large—that he's doing okay and so is the agency.

Addressing members of the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD), Tabak said he is asked every day “how I’m doing,” and his answer, “depending on the time of day,” is “I’m hanging in, I’m doing okay or I’m doing fine.”^[1]

But ACD member Judith Kimble, giving voice to the concerns of some in the research community, pressed for specifics on the search for a new NIH director. “So, it’s been a year since Francis Collins stepped down,” said Kimble, a professor of biochemistry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, “and I’d like to have some clarity about what’s going on.”

Neither Tabak nor Adrienne Hallett—NIH’s associate director for legislative policy and analysis—were able to answer Kimble’s pointed questions, and there are other related unknowns on the path to having a new director sworn in. Collins’ position is just one of many vacancies at top slots within NIH.^[2]

Kimble’s query was triggered by remarks Tabak said reflect “leading through turbulent times.” NIH’s 27 institute and center directors are “world-class experts in every single topic you can think of” and “are an extraordinary group of people” who work closely with NIH leadership, he said. They have “demonstrated that, whatever is thrown at them, they are going to deliver what is necessary.”

NIH has continued to run smoothly because of the “remarkable team of people” Tabak said he works with, including Tara Schwetz, the acting principal deputy director in Tabak’s stead, and his executive committee. “As long as they continue to do their great work, NIH is going to be just fine,” he said.

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