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NIH Director Nominee, Awaiting Votes, Urged to Toughen Sanctions for Harassers

By Theresa Defino

More than a month after President Joe Biden picked Monica Bertagnolli, M.D., director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), to head NIH, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee has not scheduled a hearing on her nomination.

And based on recent comments by an NIH legislative official, Larry Tabak will continue as acting NIH director perhaps through the fall; he predicted Bertagnolli would be running the next Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) meeting—which is in December.

Tabak has led the agency since Francis Collins retired in December 2021, ending the longest tenure of any NIH director. Tabak, named NIH's principal deputy director in August 2010, joined the agency in 2000 as director of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research.

Bertagnolli participated in the June ACD meeting but in her current capacity at NCI, a position she's held only since October. The ACD also discussed recommendations that NIH consider new "stopping rules" that would halt funding for clinical trials that aren't succeeding.^[1]

Bertagnolli's 'Leadership, Vision' Praised

NCI's first female leader, Bertagnolli hails from Harvard Medical School, where she was a surgical oncology professor and chief of the Division of Surgical Oncology at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. She joined the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Brigham and Women's Hospital in 2000.

She was also a member of the Gastrointestinal Cancer Treatment and Sarcoma Centers at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Tabak said at the December ACD meeting that Bertagnolli had "hit the ground running. We all struggle to keep up with her because she's moving really fast" due to NCI's major initiatives.^[2]

In a May 15 statement announcing the nomination, the White House said Bertagnolli "is a world-renowned surgical oncologist, cancer researcher, educator, and physician-leader who has the vision and leadership needed to deliver on NIH's mission to seek fundamental knowledge and promote human health."^[3]

"Dr. Bertagnolli has spent her career pioneering scientific discovery and pushing the boundaries of what is possible to improve cancer prevention and treatment for patients, and ensuring that patients in every community have access to quality care. As Director of the National Cancer Institute, Dr. Bertagnolli has advanced my Cancer Moonshot to end cancer as we know it. She has brought together partners and resources from different sectors to launch groundbreaking efforts in cancer prevention and early detection, a national navigation program for childhood cancers, and additional programs to bring clinical trials to more Americans," the President said.

Her "vision and leadership will ensure NIH continues to be an engine of innovation to improve the health of the American people," he added.

Echoing information on the NCI website, the White House noted Bertagnolli's parents are "first-generation Italian and French Basque immigrants" and that she "grew up on a ranch in southwestern Wyoming."

Bertagnolli's undergraduate degree is from Princeton University, and she earned her medical degree from the University of Utah College of Medicine.

The White House also noted that Bertagnolli "has been at the forefront of clinical and research oncology and championed collaborative initiatives to transform the data infrastructure for clinical cancer research. She served as group chair of the Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology, a National Clinical Trials Network member organization, and was the Chief Executive Officer of Alliance Foundation Trials, LLC, a not-for-profit corporation that conducts international cancer clinical trials and focuses on the inclusion of rural communities in clinical studies."

She is a National Academy of Medicine member, "past president and chair of the board of directors of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, and has served on the board of directors of the American Cancer Society and the Prevent Cancer Foundation," the announcement said.

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