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With Many Hopes Pinned to Her Shoulders, Bertagnolli Finally Assumes NIH's Top Post

By Theresa Defino

A long-overdue example of a successful woman in biomedical research. A force for equity in clinical trials. A beacon to restore public trust in science. A defender of the “broken” health care system who enables the “greed” of the pharmaceutical industry.

As Monica Bertagnolli, M.D., settles in as leader of NIH—following what was less a rocky road and more a slow path with one huge boulder—she bears the hopes of many and the derision of few, most notably Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. For months, Sanders refused to hold a hearing on her nomination before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee he chairs, ultimately relenting in October.^[1]

On Nov. 7, the full Senate confirmed Bertagnolli's appointment, and she began work as NIH's 17th director two days later. Bertagnolli is the first surgeon and second woman to hold the post left vacant by former NIH Director Francis Collins nearly two years ago. She served as director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for a little over a year. President Joe Biden nominated her to lead NIH in May.

Sanders, who also voted “no” following the HELP hearing, and Sen. John Fetterman, D-Pa., were the only two Democrats to vote against her. Thirteen Republicans joined the Democratic majority. The vote was 62 to 36.

Among those with high hopes for Bertagnolli's tenure is Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., who left as chair of HELP at the start of the current session of Congress to lead the chamber's appropriations committee. Prior to the vote, Murray spoke passionately about both NIH generally and specifically praised Bertagnolli, noting the significance of her appointment and the promise it holds.

NIH Holds Patients' 'Hope, Future'

“I have always strongly advocated for the NIH because I know the work that they do at so many world-class institutions, including several in Washington State, isn't just cutting edge—it's lifesaving,” Murray said from the Senate floor.^[2] “This agency, NIH, holds the hope and future of patients across the country in its hands. So, it is of the utmost importance to me to make sure we have an experienced leader at the helm of NIH, and Dr. Bertagnolli is an excellent choice to lead the agency at this critical moment. You need a steady hand to be a cancer surgeon, after all, and her credentials go far beyond her record of accomplishment as an oncologist.”

Calling Bertagnolli a “respected researcher and a proven leader,” Murray noted Bertagnolli's previous service with the American Society of Clinical Oncology, of which she was president, and on the boards of the American Cancer Society and the Prevent Cancer Foundation. Bertagnolli also was CEO of the Alliance Foundation Trials LLC, which Murray described as “a not-for-profit focused on making sure rural communities are included in clinical studies.”

Murray said Bertagnolli has the “personal experience of growing up in a rural community where she watched her uncle travel across the state to provide care to patients and watched her father fight cancer while care was far

from home,” and called attention to Bertagnolli’s “early” breast cancer diagnosis, which Bertagnolli announced publicly last October. Bertagnolli, Murray said, received “care that was made possible by NIH research. It is clear that those experiences will inform how she approaches her new role at NIH, and I know patients will be better for it.”

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