“Faces of Hope”: Biden Names Infectious Disease Expert to Lead CDC

An HIV researcher and doctor, Rochelle Walensky also studies vaccines. Plus: Obama’s surgeon general Vivek Murthy returns.

December 9, 2020 By Trent Straube

Massachusetts HIV doctor Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH, has been tapped by President-elect Joe Biden to direct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation’s public health institute. Biden’s pick does not require Senate confirmation.

> Government service was never part of my plans. But every doctor knows that when a patient is coding, your plans don’t matter. You run to the code.
>
> And when a nation is coding—if you are called to serve, you serve. pic.twitter.com/BnBq5BK2Gr
>
> — Rochelle Walensky, MD, MPH (@RWalensky)
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> December 9, 2020

Numerous health care leaders and related professional groups expressed hope and support for the person who—in the words of AIDS advocate Gregg Gonsalves—is “the perfect person to lead us out of the darkness of this pandemic.” On Twitter, Gonsalves, who is also an associate professor at Yale, describes Walensky as “a caring clinician, a leader in cost effectiveness research. She is a model of integrity down to her bones,” adding: “I haven’t been this hopeful in months.”

“This is some of the best news I’ve heard in a very, very long time and certainly shines a bright light on the COVID pandemic knowing that we’re going to have help on the way,” Robbie Goldstein, MD, PhD, a colleague of Walensky’s, told WBUR, Boston’s National Public Radio (NPR) station.

“In Dr. Walensky, the president-elect has chosen a gifted infectious diseases physician and leader who has demonstrated a deep commitment to the application of public health and science in leading evidence-based, equitable and cost-effective responses to some of the greatest public health challenges our nation faces,” said leaders from the Infectious Disease Society of America and its HIV Medicine Association in a joint statement. “Her contributions to research, policy and practice in understanding, responding to and controlling pandemic threats that include HIV, tuberculosis and now COVID-19 have informed global and domestic efforts that are critical to protecting Americans and advancing global health.”

> The faces of hope. @RWalensky at @CDCgov, @vivek_murthy back as Surgeon General and @ERIC_Yale (Marcella Nunez Smith) as national lead on health equity. Brilliance, kindness, integrity, passion. This is change I can believe in. #COVID19 pic.twitter.com/6Uj9aPwdMy
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> — Gregg Gonsalves (@gregggonsalves) December 7, 2020

NPR also reported that the leader of the National Public Health Association, Georges C. Benjamin, MD, acknowledged that Walensky is taking over a CDC that has been demoralized under the Trump administration, which doesn’t respect science. Nonetheless, Benjamin added, the CDC remains on sound foundation.

BuildBackBetter.gov, the website of the Biden-Harris transition team, describes Walensky this way:

> Dr. Rochelle Walensky currently serves as Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital and Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. An influential scholar whose pioneering research has helped advance the national and global response to HIV/AIDS, Dr. Walensky is one of America’s most respected experts on the value

> of testing and treatment of deadly viruses.
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> A practicing infectious diseases physician, Dr. Walensky has been recognized internationally for her work to improve HIV screening and care in South Africa. She is a past Chair of the Office of AIDS Research Advisory Council at the National Institutes of Health, Chair-elect of the HIV Medical Association, and has previously served as an advisor to both the World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. Originally from Maryland, Dr. Walensky received her bachelor of arts degree from Washington University in St. Louis, her MD from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and her master's in public health degree from the Harvard School of Public Health.

You can learn more about Walensky's HIV work via a podcast from Massachusetts General Hospital titled Charged: Stories From the Women Leading Health Care. The relevant episode is titled "*HIV—Treating a Changing Epidemic With Dr. Rochelle Walensky*," which you can listen to below (a transcript is also available on the website).

In related national health news, Biden nominated Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, as the nation's surgeon general. If his name sounds familiar, it's because Murthy previously held the post from 2014 to 2017 under the Obama-Biden administration. Murthy currently serves as cochair of Biden's COVID-19 Advisory Board.

Murthy's nomination will have to be confirmed by the Senate.

BuildBackBetter.gov has this to say about Murthy:

> A decorated physician, research scientist, and former Vice Admiral in the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, Dr. Murthy is among the most trusted voices in America on matters of public health.
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> As "America's Doctor," Dr. Murthy helped lead the national response to a range of health challenges, including the Ebola and Zika viruses, the opioid crisis, and the negative effects of stress and loneliness on Americans' physical and mental well-being. Prior to his tenure as Surgeon General, Dr. Murthy co-founded VISIONS, a global HIV/AIDS education organization; the Swasthya Project, an India-based community health partnership that trained women in rural communities to become local leaders in health care and health education; TrialNetworks, a technology company dedicated to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of scientific research collaboration; and Doctors for America, a nonprofit mobilizing physicians and medical students to improve access to affordable care. Born in England and raised in Miami, Dr. Murthy received his bachelor of arts degree from Harvard, his master's in business administration from the Yale School of Management, and his MD from the Yale School of Medicine.

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