Senate Confirms Stephen Hahn as FDA Head

Oncologist wins Senate backing by a vote of 72 to 18.

December 12, 2019 By Liz Highleyman

On December 12, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Stephen Hahn, MD, as the new commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Hahn has been the chief medical executive at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston since 2018 and head of the division of radiation oncology since 2015.

Ned Sharpless, MD, who served as acting FDA commissioner after the unexpected resignation of Scott Gottlieb, MD, in March, has returned to his position as director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), while former acting NCI head Douglas Lowy, MD, resumed his role as deputy director.

The FDA is responsible for ensuring the safety and effectiveness of drugs, vaccines, other biological products and medical devices. It also monitors the safety of the nation's food supply, dietary supplements and cosmetics and regulates tobacco products.

Hahn takes the reins as the agency grapples with issues including the high cost of drugs, regulation of cannabidiol (CBD), an outbreak of serious illness related to vaping and nationwide efforts to ban flavored tobacco products and e-cigarettes.

Congratulations to Dr. Hahn—@POTUS has chosen a superbly qualified leader for @US_FDA, & Dr. Hahn garnered strong bipartisan support. Having a confirmed Commissioner of Dr. Hahn's caliber will be a major boost to the already rapid pace of @POTUS's aggressive public health agenda. pic.twitter.com/yApAzxD7aa

— Secretary Alex Azar (@SecAzar) December 12, 2019

Hahn was confirmed by an overwhelming margin of 72 (including 49 Republicans and 23 Democrats) to 18.

As previously reported, Hahn specializes in the treatment of lung cancer and sarcoma. Prior to MD Anderson, he was the chair of the radiation oncology department at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine; he was also previously a senior investigator at the NCI. After receiving his medical degree from Temple University in Philadelphia, Hahn completed a residency in radiation oncology and a fellowship at the NCI and a residency in internal medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. He has never previously held a government position.

Hahn's confirmation was applauded by the American Association for Cancer Research, of which Hahn has been a member since 1999, and the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO), where he served on the board of directors from 2014 to 2018.

"I wish to extend our heartfelt congratulations to Dr. Hahn," said AACR chief executive officer Margaret Foti, PhD, MD. "The AACR is looking forward to working closely with him and his extraordinary team at the FDA to help facilitate and expedite the development and approval of safe and effective treatments for cancer patients."

"Dr. Hahn's impressive background as a triple board-certified physician in medicine, medical oncology and radiation oncology coupled with his broad administrative experiences will allow him to ably lead the thousands of career professionals charged with ensuring U.S. consumer protection and public health," said Theodore DeWeese, MD, chair of ASTRO's board of directors. "Our support and respect for Dr. Hahn is based on his proven commitment to patients, science-based decision-making and consumer health and safety. We look forward to his leadership as he steps into this critically important role as FDA commissioner."

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