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Obama Nominates Francis Collins to Lead NIH

Jacquelyn K. Beals, PhD

July 9, 2009 (Staunton, Virginia) — People here in Francis Collins' home town had reason to be proud today, as local and national headlines announced Collins' nomination by President Obama to lead the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NIH has operated with an acting director since the departure of Elias Zerhouni, MD, in 2008.

The director's position is a presidential appointment requiring confirmation by the US Senate. If confirmed — which most consider all but certain — Francis Collins, MD, PhD, will be the 16th person to hold the NIH post.

Dr. Collins has provided numerous reasons for local pride: his research at the University of Michigan that discovered the gene for cystic fibrosis in 1989; his 15 years as director of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), from which he resigned in 2008; and his leadership of the Human Genome Project, completed in less time and at lower cost than anticipated. By his own assessment, one of the most satisfying achievements during his years as NHGRI director was passage of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act.

"We think [his nomination] is great, for a lot of different reasons," Joann A. Boughman, PhD, executive vice president of the American Society of Human Genetics in Bethesda, Maryland, said in a telephone interview with *Medscape Medical News*.

"Francis' work as a scientist goes from the most basic research, all the way through translational to the care of patients.... He has active involvement in the full gamut from the wet-lab through the translation — bench to bedside. I think that's good for everybody," she said.

"And anybody who brings a federal program in under time and under budget! He may have set the bar too high for himself," she laughed. Dr. Boughman is also a board-certified medical geneticist, and she chairs the Molecular and Clinical Genetic Devices Panel of the Food and Drug Administration.

The NIH Director oversees a budget of \$29.5 billion (FY 2009), 27 institutes and centers, and a staff of more than 18,000, including 6,000 research scientists. Unlike President George W. Bush, whose selection of Dr. Zerhouni took 14 months as he searched for a scientist who could support the administration's funding restrictions, President Obama is just over 6 months into his first term.

A challenge for any NIH director is the variety of disciplines represented. "The thing about genetics, in biomedical research, is genetics is everywhere," said Dr. Boughman. "And in that respect having a geneticist lead the NIH is a very timely and appropriate approach, because of [Francis'] experience and his breadth. He has demonstrated over the years both his visionary approach and his ability to bring together scientists, with disparate and sometimes very opinionated minds, to move ahead with something — as he did with the mapping of the Human Genome."

Dr. Collins' nomination has received enthusiastic responses from organizations such as the American Association for Cancer Research, the Personalized Medicine Coalition, and the Association of American Medical Colleges. However, the National Breast Cancer Coalition voiced reservations, suggesting that someone outside of the NIH system might better challenge "the present stagnation."

Another potential source of conflict is Collins' open avowal of religion, not only in his personal life but in writings such as his 2006 book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, and in his advocating a view he calls "BioLogos," which proposes God as the answer to questions that science cannot address.

Nevertheless, Dr. Collins has a good relationship with Congress, and he will benefit from the fact that the revised rules for broader use of stem cells in federally funded research were already in place before Collins' nomination.

"He's very articulate for all audiences. He is accessible to the guy on the street, and to students, and to the practicing clinicians who are not genetics experts, and to policy makers," observed Dr. Boughman. "But one of the most important characteristics

that he brings to the job is an incredible passion for science and its translation into application."

Dr. Boughman has disclosed no relevant financial relationships.

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