



American College of Preventive Medicine

February 6, 2018

The Honorable Alex M. Azar
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary,

The American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM), the national professional society representing and supporting preventive medicine physicians in their role as public health and health systems leaders, is pleased to congratulate you on your new appointment and looks forward to continuing our work with the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) under your leadership. ACPM wants to support you in addressing one of your first challenges—appointing a new Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Specifically, ACPM would like to offer its perspective on the necessary qualifications needed in such a role to truly protect America from health, safety, and security threats.

The CDC outlines on its web site six key roles to meet its mission: 1) detecting and responding to new and emerging health threats; 2) tackling the biggest health problems causing death and disability for Americans; 3) putting science and advanced technology into action to prevent disease; 4) promoting healthy and safe behaviors, communities, and environment; 5) developing leaders and training the public health workforce, including disease detectives; and 6) taking the health pulse of our nation. ACPM believes it is vital to appoint a physician to this position who is capable of addressing these roles at a population and public health level; a specific set of competencies that not all physicians possess. Our perspective on the competencies needed to assure CDC thrives in each of these roles follows.

Detecting and Responding to New and Emerging Health Threats

There are always new health threats on the horizon, from Zika to Ebola to deadly strains of the flu. Responding to these diseases requires quick and thorough assessment, containment, implementation of treatment, and often elevating awareness of the threat. These steps necessitate a deep understanding of public health, including how diseases move through populations and the most effective ways to stop their progress. Physicians with training in epidemiology are well-suited for this type of work, which rarely comes in a setting that is solely clinical. Without experience in assessing populations, implementing actions across large numbers of people, and leading campaigns to raise the public's awareness of health risks, a CDC Director would have a very difficult time effectively fulfilling this role.

Tackling the Biggest Health Problems Causing Death and Disability for Americans

Seven of the top ten leading causes of death in the United States come from chronic diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular conditions, Alzheimer's and diabetes. Many physicians may

have experience with these conditions on a clinical level, and that experience cannot be discounted. However, widespread change in the number and severity of these diseases will be difficult without population-level interventions. Some of the major causes of chronic disease include lack of exercise or physical activity, poor nutrition, tobacco use, and drinking too much alcohol. If these known risk factors were eliminated, at least 80% of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes and 40% of cancer would be prevented.¹ The CDC Director must be versed in how to deliver and support Lifestyle Medicine--the scientific approach to decreasing disease risk and illness burden by utilizing lifestyle interventions such as nutrition, physical activity, stress reduction, rest, smoking cessation, and avoidance of alcohol abuse—in both the clinic and community to address the top health problems in the United States. Many of the most successful steps forward in improving or protecting the health of our citizens, such as vaccinations and smoking cessation, have come as a result of effective integration of large scale clinical and community interventions and campaigns. The CDC cannot make headway on these health problems without leadership that understands how to bridge these efforts.

Putting Science and Advanced Technology into Action to Prevent Disease

Technology has progressed medicine at a rapid pace. It has allowed greater numbers of the public to access medical information, advice, and even diagnoses (e.g., through telehealth), and there have been great strides made in tracking the health of populations through Health Information Technology (Health IT). The ability to store, share, and analyze health information is critical to a Department whose purpose is to protect and improve the health of the country. The CDC needs a leader that recognizes the benefits of technology and knows how to apply it in more than just a clinical setting. Public health is bolstered by data and analytics, and the Director role will be well served by someone with experience in that area.

Promoting Healthy and Safe Behaviors, Communities, and Environment

Although each person and each patient is different, there are common threads throughout populations experiencing disease and poor health. The CDC Director must be familiar with “social determinants of health,” defined as “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.”² Environmental factors, including physical environments and the situations people are born into and live in, are often driving influences of behaviors and disease manifestation within communities. Different communities will respond to medical advice and situations differently. A CDC Director who understands and views health through a social determinants lens will be much more effective in delivering public health campaigns.

Developing Leaders and Training the Public Health Workforce

The CDC’s focus is public health. It not only employs thousands of dedicated public health workers, but also assures the development of an effective public health workforce at the local and state levels. Leadership for the public health workforce must start from the top. It is antithetical to expect population and public health leadership development from physicians who have experience and training in neither. The CDC Director should model the unique capabilities that come from physicians specifically trained in population and public health.

¹ http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/part1/en/index11.html

² US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. www.healthypeople.gov

Taking the Health Pulse of Our Nation

The responsibility for monitoring and addressing the health of our nation as a whole is a critical one. It requires training and knowledge of not just clinical practice, but population and public health, including effective communications to the public, providers, and health care institutions about risk and how to manage it. The CDC Director should be the nation's public health doctor. The American public is CDC's patient, and this calls for a Director with experience and training in assessing, diagnosing, treating, and communicating with populations, not just individual patients.

Fortunately, a medical specialty that trains physicians in public and population health already exists. Preventive Medicine is a unique medical specialty—in existence since 1948 and recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) — that focuses on the health of individuals, communities, and defined populations. Preventive Medicine specialists are licensed medical doctors (MD) or doctors of osteopathy (DO) who possess core competencies in biostatistics, epidemiology, environmental and occupational medicine, planning and evaluation of health services, management of healthcare organizations, research into causes of disease and injury population groups, and the practice of prevention in clinical medicine. Preventive medicine physicians generally have a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in addition to their MD or DO.

Preventive medicine physicians have the training and expertise to advance population health outcomes. These physicians are experts in disease prevention, health promotion, disaster preparedness, quality improvement, and patient safety and are at the forefront of efforts to integrate primary care and public health.

As HHS moves forward to fill the CDC Director role, we urge you to appoint a public health professional with both the training and experience necessary to lead the CDC in promoting the health of its people. ACPM is at the ready to assist in identifying suitable candidates for the position, if and as needed.

ACPM appreciates your attention to this matter, and looks forward to continuing to work with the Department of Health & Human Services to improve health systems through prevention and public health.

Sincerely,



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President, American College of Preventive Medicine