

# NIH cancer chief to serve as acting FDA commissioner

March 12 2019, by Matthew Perrone

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This 2018 photo made available by the National Cancer Institute shows Dr. Norman E. Sharpless. On Tuesday, March 12, 2019, The Food and Drug Administration announced that Sharpless will temporarily take charge of the

agency after the unexpected departure of its current chief, Scott Gottlieb. (H. Darr Beiser/NCI via AP)

The head of the National Cancer Institute will temporarily take charge of the Food and Drug Administration next month after the departure of its current chief.

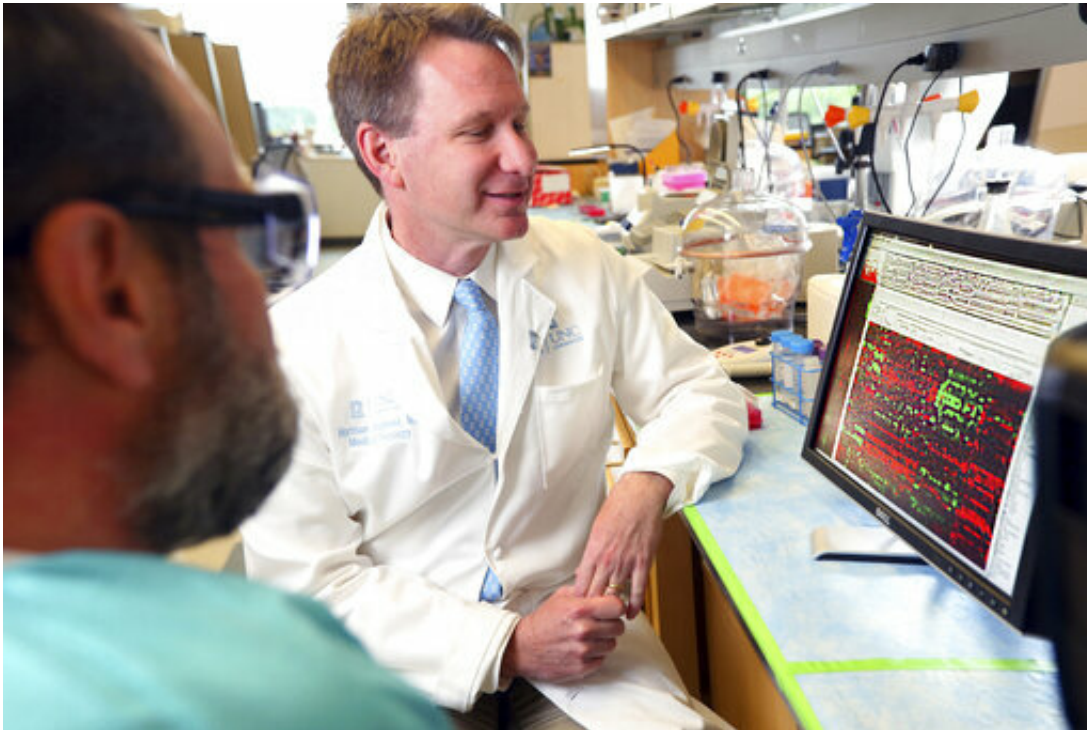
The appointment Tuesday of Dr. Ned Sharpless comes a week after Scott Gottlieb unexpectedly announced his resignation.

Sharpless currently heads the National Institutes of Health's cancer division, which directs billions in [federal funding](#) and grants for research. His name has been circulated as one of several [government officials](#) likely to succeed Gottlieb on a permanent basis.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said the search for a new FDA commissioner is underway.

The FDA's top official is nominated by the president and must be confirmed by the Senate, typically following public hearings before health lawmakers.

Last Tuesday, Gottlieb said he would step in down in April after less than two years leading the FDA, a massive public health agency that regulates the food, drug, medical device and tobacco industries, among others. He was widely viewed as one of President Donald Trump's most effective administrators, serving as a key messenger on the federal response to rising drug prices, the opioid epidemic and underage use [e-cigarettes](#).



This 2015 photo made available by the Feature Photo Service for IBM shows Dr. Norman Sharpless, director of the University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, examines DNA sequencing data in Chapel Hill, N.C. On Tuesday, March 12, 2019, The Food and Drug Administration announced that Sharpless will temporarily take charge of the agency next month after the departure of its current chief, Scott Gottlieb. (Jared Lazarus/Feature Photo Service for IBM via AP)

Gottlieb said he wants to spend more time with his family after commuting weekly to Washington from his home in Connecticut.

During his tenure, Gottlieb launched a series of ambitious public [health](#) initiatives, including a plan to make cigarettes less addictive by drastically cutting nicotine levels. But that plan and many others have barely progressed beyond the earliest stages, raising questions about their timeline and prospects for completion. FDA commissioners report to the White House, but generally have broad leeway to choose their priorities.

Sharpless has publicly supported FDA's efforts to more tightly regulate tobacco and crack down on underage vaping. E-cigarettes are generally viewed as less harmful than traditional tobacco products, but they usually contain nicotine which can harm the adolescent brain. Some research also suggests that teenagers who use e-cigarettes are more likely to try regular cigarettes.

Sharpless has led the National Cancer Institute since October 2017. He previously was a professor and administrator at the University of North Carolina, where he also earned his medical degree in 1993.

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