

Biden chooses cancer expert to lead National Institutes of Health

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President Joe Biden on Monday nominated cancer specialist Dr. Monica Bertagnolli to become director of the National Institutes of Health.

Bertagnolli is a cancer surgeon and researcher who last fall became the first female head of the NIH's National Cancer Institute. If confirmed by the Senate, she would become the second woman named permanent director of the NIH, one of the world's leading biomedical research agencies.

"Dr. Bertagnolli has spent her career pioneering scientific discovery and pushing the boundaries of what is possible to improve cancer prevention and treatment," Biden said in a statement. She "will ensure NIH continues to be an engine of innovation to improve the health of the American people."

Bertagnolli also would bring a patient's perspective to the job. Shortly after becoming NCI director, she was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer.

"It's one thing to know about cancer as a physician but it is another to experience it firsthand as a patient as well," Bertagnolli said in announcing her diagnosis and treatment plans in December. "To anyone with cancer today: I am truly in this together with you."

Cancer is a top priority for Biden, who lost his adult son Beau to brain cancer in 2015.

But the NIH, with a \$47 billion budget, funds and oversees a wide variety of medical research beyond cancer, including infectious diseases, heart disease, Alzheimer's and other brain disorders, diabetes, drug addiction and mental health.

The NIH has been without a permanent director since Dr. Francis Collins, a well-known geneticist, stepped down in December 2021 after 12 years at the helm. If confirmed, Bertagnolli would replace the agency's acting director, Dr. Lawrence Tabak.

Prior to her appointment as NCI chief, Bertagnolli was a Harvard professor and cancer surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital. The daughter of first-generation Italian and French Basque immigrants, she grew up on a ranch in southwestern Wyoming. She earned an engineering degree from Princeton University and attended medical school at the University of Utah.

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