

Profile

Rochelle Walensky: new Director of the US CDC



The HIV/AIDS epidemic was still raging in early 1995 when Rochelle Walensky was an internal medicine resident at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, USA. “As interns, we were each admitting six or seven patients a night and half of them had HIV or were dying of AIDS”, she recalled. “We could prevent or treat some of their opportunistic infections, but we didn’t give them a lot of hope”, she said. Yet by the year’s end, the US FDA had approved a cocktail of antiretroviral drugs that meant AIDS was no longer a certain death sentence. “We could give it to people and say there was hope”, she said. This “huge inflection point” in the epidemic convinced Walensky to specialise in infectious diseases. That year she also graduated from medical school and married another Hopkins medical student, Loren Walensky, now a paediatric oncologist; the couple have three sons.

Growing up in Maryland, one of the few physicians she knew was her own paediatrician, a woman who was a “role model”. As a teenager, Walensky “wanted to have a career where I would be financially independent” that offered interaction with people and “something I was reasonably good at and enjoyed, which was the math sciences”. Medicine was the logical choice. She became an infectious diseases clinical and research fellow at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) in Boston and earned a masters degree from the Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health. Eventually, she became an attending physician at MGH, Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, and, in 2017, Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at MGH.

A highly respected researcher, Walensky has published nearly 300 papers, many focused on the cost-effectiveness of HIV interventions and aimed at improving patients’ care. “I call the research that I do policy motivating”, she said. An example is work with colleagues “to influence the routine HIV screening policy in this country and to demonstrate the clinical and economic value of screening for this disease”. A 2006 landmark study showed that advances in HIV treatment in the USA added nearly 3 million years to patients’ lives. “She’s an outstanding infectious disease physician”, said Chris Beyer, Professor of Epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and her co-author. “She’s very widely known for her work critiquing the cost and financing of US health care”, he said. In 2019, she testified before a US congressional committee investigating the cost of PrEP drugs. She discussed her research showing why both HIV treatment and PrEP prevention were needed to end the HIV epidemic, and how the high cost of HIV drugs was an obstacle to care.

In 2020, Walensky became a trusted source of advice on COVID-19. She was appointed to Massachusetts’s COVID-19 Advisory Board in March. “We were hit hard very early” at MGH, she said. The hospital needed guidelines for treating

COVID-19, for enrolling people in clinical trials, and “to triage tests for those at highest risk when we had so few tests [for the virus]”. Walensky helped to coordinate response efforts with other academic medical centres, and to convey their collective voice in opinion articles for newspapers to inform the public. And she also published research with co-authors that supported the reopening of US college campuses only if people practised physical distancing and other preventive measures and had frequent universal routine mandatory testing. Another study showed how swift and broad COVID-19 vaccination distribution plans and public education efforts improve vaccine efficacy.

Her career took a surprising direction on Nov 13, 2020, with a voicemail message asking Walensky to call Ron Klain, White House Chief of Staff for President-elect Joe Biden. Klain asked if she would be interested in becoming Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Under the Trump administration, the CDC has been undermined by political interference and science deniers, and was losing the battle against COVID-19. Yet Walensky was undaunted. When she told her supervisor, Katrina Armstrong, Chair of the Department of Medicine at MGH, about the offer, Armstrong said Walensky’s “excitement and hope” were palpable. “She is well aware of the challenge”, said Armstrong. “And her appointment is such a good sign about where things are going to go.” Leading the CDC is not only about scientific work, said Beyer. “You need somebody who can really speak across the government but also speak to the American people. And Rochelle Walensky is a superb communicator...and a dynamic and charismatic person.” Another of her collaborators, A David Paltiel, Professor of Public Health at Yale School of Public Health, is thrilled about her new job: “I’m as ecstatic for the nation as I am broken-hearted about the loss of my colleague.”

Walensky is expected to be sworn in as CDC Director on Jan 20, 2021. Her priorities include ensuring that CDC staff “will feel unmuzzled, and feel like the science is leading the way again”. She also wants a review to confirm all COVID-19 guidance is evidence-based, and not tarnished by politics. And when the USA gets through the pandemic, Walensky said “we will realise, unfortunately, that there’s been a massive amount of collateral damage to other health metrics related to COVID-19”. Some people have not had access to medical care, exacerbated by years of health inequities, and there is likely to be more uncontrolled hypertension, increased obesity, and missed paediatric vaccinations, she said. “We know that the opioid crisis has only gotten worse and I know we’ve lost ground in the HIV epidemic, and mental health and suicide—there are so many things that the CDC needs to tackle.”

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