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Bertagnolli Affirms Support for Basic Science, Calls 'Direct Engagement' Key to Restoring Trust

By Theresa Defino

“Thrilled” or “thrilling” might have been the word of the day during the first meeting of the highest-ranking advisory panel to new NIH director Monica Bertagnolli, M.D., who took the helm in November, nearly two years after Francis Collins stepped down. Just before Bertagnolli banged the gavel during the opening session of the recent two-day meeting of the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD), she proclaimed, “I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to be here with you today.”^[1]

Seconds later, at the start of formal introductions of NIH leaders and ACD members, Bertagnolli intoned a second time that she was “thrilled to be here in my new role as NIH director.” Then a third “thrilled” followed as Bertagnolli announced that Larry Tabak, who served as acting director, “has agreed to continue to serve as our principal deputy director.” With a laugh, she added, “Yay!” Tabak is returning to a post he’s held since 2010.

In her more than-hour-long remarks at the beginning of the ACD meeting, Bertagnolli filled in some details on her upbringing and her goals as director. She also spoke of ensuring fundamental science can deliver benefits and of the critical need to rebuild public trust. The ACD also heard an update on funding challenges facing NIH as Congress’ short-term resolution expires in February.

Agency—and Congress-watchers—will recall that Collins “retired” in December 2021 to focus on running the lab at the National Human Genome Research Institute. The vacancy lingered for nearly 18 months until President Joe Biden nominated Bertagnolli in May of last year.

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