



## New leadership at the US CDC

Rochelle Walensky, an infectious diseases expert, promises to provide transparency, accountability, and restored trust at the embattled organisation. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.



Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

For more on political interference at the CDC see *World Report Lancet* 2020; 396: 875

For more on Rochelle Walensky see *Online/Perspectives Lancet* 2021; published online Jan 14. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00076-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00076-3)

US President-elect Joe Biden's pick to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Rochelle Walensky, will take the helm next week, at a pivotal moment: Americans have never needed the CDC more, yet it has been hamstrung by a sceptical Trump administration during a devastating pandemic. The USA has suffered the world's highest COVID-19 death toll, at more than 374 000 and rising. A highly contagious variant of the virus has arrived from the UK, and distribution of long-awaited vaccines has hit roadblocks.

In choosing Walensky, Biden has opted for "one of the most highly regarded people in infectious disease research and practice, who has been at the forefront of important work bridging science and policy", said Jennifer Kates, director of global health and HIV policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation. Biden's choice was praised by many in the medical and science communities, according to news reports, and elicited relief from several admirers on Twitter.

Walensky is chief of the infectious diseases division at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, and a practising infectious diseases physician. As a research scientist, she has analysed the cost-effectiveness of HIV care in the USA, including routine screening and antiviral therapy.

In March, 2020, Massachusetts Republican Governor Charlie Baker appointed Walensky to his COVID-19 advisory board to help coordinate the state's pandemic response. She was an early advocate of wearing masks and expanding testing to control the spread of the virus.

The CDC has more than 13 000 employees and a budget of

nearly US\$8 billion. It operates around the world to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks and threats ranging from foodborne infections to HIV/AIDS, and now COVID-19. Although Walensky has little experience running a government agency or dealing with Congress, that does not worry Katrina Armstrong, chair of medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and Walensky's supervisor.

"I know she will build an extraordinary team to help with those management tasks", said Armstrong. "She is committed in every way to listening and taking advice...and is going to do an incredible job."

Walensky will bring a fresh perspective to the CDC, said Laurie Garrett, a *Foreign Policy* magazine columnist and infectious diseases expert. "She can be perceived as someone who is legitimately searching for expert consult." Garrett recommended that Walensky create advisory committees to identify and address areas where the CDC needs improvement, such as the issues that led to COVID-19 testing problems early in the pandemic. "And they need to hit the ground fast."

Walensky inherits an agency shaken by President Donald Trump's political operatives who threatened to censor COVID-19 research in the CDC's highly respected *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* journal and demanded changes in guidance posted on the CDC website. Trump flouted its recommendations and contradicted his hand-picked CDC director, Robert Redfield.

"The CDC has been sidelined, maligned, and undermined and its recommendations have been delayed, rejected, and criticised", said former CDC director Tom Frieden, who is now president of Resolve to Save Lives. "There is a lot of work that's going to

need to be done to ensure that people trust what CDC is saying."

In an exclusive interview with *The Lancet*, Walensky said that "science has been muzzled", during the Trump administration. She aims to reassure CDC scientists that their voice will be heard and ensure that the public understands the scientific rationale for policy changes and guidance. She also said she wants investment to rebuild "the failed infrastructure in public health" so that data flow smoothly to and from the states.

When President-elect Biden announced Walensky's appointment—which does not require Senate approval—he pledged to "follow the guidance of scientists", a promise Walensky believes he will keep.

"I wouldn't have taken this job if I thought that wouldn't be the case", Walensky said. "I have no intention of leading an agency where the *MMWR* is reviewed by politicians to see whether it can be published."

Repairing the damage "is not going to be easy by any stretch", she said. "But I think you start with [saying] we're going to lead the CDC with science, that we are going to be trusted, we are going to be transparent, and we're going to be accountable for our actions."

Walensky's other priorities include addressing the opioid crisis, HIV, and health disparities, after treating vulnerable groups for most of her career.

"There's incredible inequity in how we deliver care and who we deliver it to", she said. "And to the extent that I have it in my power, that is going to change... The fact that there's three to four times more [COVID-19] hospitalisations of people from black and brown communities is just not acceptable."

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