

Opinion: Public health hurdles at the federal level

By Anne Foster

One of the priorities mentioned during Trump's election campaign, public health, is thus far missing from the "top issues" category of his government's new website.

Experts are stressing the importance of governmental support for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its work with international institutions, to prevent the spread of illness in the United States. The CDC plays an important role in public health, detecting and responding to STDs and infectious diseases such as Ebola, fighting the proliferation of highly antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and working to lower chronic health issues such as obesity and heart disease. The agency is also in charge of battling serious issues caused by substance abuse, especially prescription drug abuse, in an attempt to reduce the high rate of drug overdoses in the U.S.

Tom Frieden, former director of the CDC, recently told the press that the CDC lacks the funding or power to deal with imminent threats, with due rapidity, and that the establishment of an emergency fund for emergencies, is key. Legal authority to act quickly is also important, if serious threats such as Zika and Ebola, which know no borders, are to be addressed as and when they arise, so they can be nipped in the bud.

Frieden also noted that a repeal of the Affordable Care Act would place the Prevention and Public Health Fund, which takes up over 10 percent of the agency's budget, at risk. The Prevention and Public Health Fund has supported immunization programs, which could be eliminated if funding was no longer available.

Frieden recently handed over the reins of the CDC to Anne Schuchat, who was principal deputy director during his reign. It is not clear how long she will continue to hold the post, since she is currently acting head. What is clear is that whoever commands the CDC in the long-term, will have to make education and training a priority, so the agency can glean the most pressing issues both on a national and worldwide scale.

According to Frieden, keen diplomacy skills are also key if trust is to be built between countries. Most countries, he noted, would be reticent to admit they were facing the problem of superbugs, as bad press could result in a big drop in tourist figures. Therefore, great diplomacy would be needed in dealing with these countries.

The new CDC director will also need to stress the importance of funding global health initiatives. It is a myth to think that problems such as Ebola can be solved by closing borders. Rather, other countries are unlikely to share knowledge about the health threats they are facing, unless a relationship of trust is established. The United States needs to be financially involved if it is to help these countries detect and quell serious health threats. Providing funds for research is also important. For instance, the link between Zika and microcephaly in babies has been discovered, yet there is much that is still to be learned about the long-term effects of this virus.

The administration will also need to develop plans for tackling HIV/AIDS. The CDC notes that around 1.2 million Americans are currently battling HIV. Thus far, Trump's platform on health care has not mentioned the issue. Vice President Mike Pence, meanwhile, was at the center of the largest HIV outbreak when he was governor of Indiana. The outbreak, which occurred in 2015, saw Pence initially refuse to lift the state's prohibition of needle exchange programs, which have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of spreading HIV. Pence has voiced his opposition to needle

exchanges forming part of an anti-drug policy. During the outbreak, he did allow some of these programs to operate in Indiana, but some many argue that the response should have been quicker and more extensive.

Trump's choice for secretary of Health and Human Services, meanwhile, Tom Price, opposes the expansion of Medicaid, which aids many of those battling HIV and AIDS. As Global Health Access Project activist, Matt Kavanaugh states, "One of the most important things that happened with Medicaid expansion is that people were able to move off of ADAP and not just get HIV drugs but full [health] insurance."

The Trump government's health policy is still to be formulated, though it is hoped that it will uphold rather than destroy the national health safety net, and take a global view of major health concerns.

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