Andrew C. von Eschenbach Appointed New NCI Director

January 01, 2002

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The President announced his choice 9 weeks after the departure of former NCI director Richard D. Klausner, MD, who left NCI to become president of the Case Institute for Health, Science, and Technology.

Prior to accepting the NCI directorship, Dr. von Eschenbach held the Roy M. and Phyllis Gough Huffington Research Distinguished Chair in Urologic Oncology at M.D. Anderson and served as director of the center’s Genitourinary Cancer Center and its Prostate Cancer Research Program. He was also president-elect of the American Cancer Society, a position he resigned on being named NCI director.

Mr. Bush announced Dr. von Eschenbach’s appointment at a White House ceremony attended by Tommy G. Thompson, Secretary of Health and Human Services, and other senior government officials. Dr. von Eschenbach will serve as the 12th director of the NCI since Congress created it in 1938, the first unit of what would become the National Institutes of Health.

"Andy von Eschenbach is one of America’s finest medical researchers," President Bush said. "Andy also understands personally the importance of our war on cancer. He is a two-time cancer survivor, all too familiar with cancer’s frightening effects. He will bring to his new position not only expertise and talent and dedication, but compassion for the millions of cancer patients and their families who are struggling with this disease."

Dr. von Eschenbach was diagnosed with melanoma in 1989 and with prostate cancer in 2000. He has said that his career decision to focus his research efforts on prostate cancer was influenced in part by his father’s struggle with the disease in the 1970s.

Speaking at the White House ceremony, Dr. von Eschenbach said, "God has blessed America with talent, resources, and resolve. And today, Mr. President, I am blessed by your trust and your confidence. To those to whom much is given, much is expected. I pledge to honor your trust by following your example of fostering cooperations and collaborations that make it possible for Americans to meet any challenge—even the challenge of conquering cancer."

The New Director’s Goals

In comments in Washington and in Houston, Dr. von Eschenbach provided a general outline of his goals as NCI director, including a pledge to promote discovery through basic research.

"We must recognize that scientific discovery, although essential, is not sufficient," he said at the White House. "We cannot rest until we translate our new understanding of cancer into interventions that will detect cancer and new drugs that will treat and even prevent cancer. Only then can scientific discovery result in saved lives and reduced suffering. And once discovered and developed, we must assure that these new interventions are delivered to patients and communities at risk."

Dr. von Eschenbach also took up the cause of greater collaboration: "Discovery, development, and delivery of state-of-the-art cancer care and control requires collaboration," he said. "As NCI director, I am determined to support Secretary Thompson and the department’s effort to create collaboration among federal and state agencies, public and private institutions, cancer organizations and cancer survivors[groups that are crucial to accelerating the process from discovery to delivery."

In remarks released by M.D. Anderson, Dr. von Eschenbach said that "because we are beginning to understand cancer at the genetic and molecular level, we have many opportunities to develop targeted therapies. I am confident that the answers to the overall cancer problem will come through broadening basic research and transferring new discoveries from that research to more effective methods of detecting, treating, and preventing all types of cancers."

His goal for the future, he said, "is to accelerate making new discoveries and delivering targeted
therapies as rapidly as possible to cancer patients. I want to extend the training and development of young scientists and clinicians who can hasten our progress, and I am keenly aware of the need to reduce the burden of cancer for those in minority and underserved populations."

The new NCI director earned his medical degree from Georgetown University in 1967. Over the next decade, he completed residencies in general surgery and urology at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia and served as an instructor in urology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. After service in the US Navy Medical Corps, he accepted a fellowship in urologic oncology at M.D. Anderson in 1976, and joined its faculty a year later.

As a researcher, Dr. Eschenbach has pursued work on prostatic neoplasms, gene therapy, hormonal antineoplastic agents, and animal disease models for cancer. He has published more than 200 scientific articles, books, and book chapters; served on the board of the National Coalition for Cancer Research; helped found the National Dialogue on Cancer; and served as a vice president of the American Cancer Society.

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