

Donald Kennedy to Head FDA

Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., has named Donald Kennedy, a Stanford University biologist and teacher, to be commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration. The announcement, which came on 3 March, took almost everybody in rumor-happy Washington by surprise. In the first place, Kennedy is not an M.D. and although there is no good reason why the FDA commissioner need be a physician, everyone who speculated on the post at all guessed that the new Administration would maintain what has been a "traditional" requirement for the post since 1965. In the second place, Kennedy is a Ph.D. (from Harvard) neurophysiologist who has had very little direct experience with drugs or drug policy. As he told *Science*, his only contact with drugs has been in research when he used to "dump drugs on neuron preparations" for the study of neurophysiological processes. It is hardly the kind of background one might anticipate in an FDA commissioner. However, it seems that Kennedy's very lack of experience in the drug field—from pharmacology to prescription writing—makes him an appealing choice to FDA's multitudes of antagonistic constituents. It is a political honeymoon to be sure, but Kennedy will have the luxury of taking office with expressions of approval even from the agency's critics.



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The Nader-affiliated Health Research Group for instance, which monitors FDA on behalf of the "consumer," welcomes Kennedy and his Ph.D. on grounds that a man who has not been trained in the medical profession has not been taught from school days on to believe that all drugs and drug-makers are good. (Kennedy, for his part, is happy to have this public interest support but points out, lest anyone get too carried away, that he has had considerable contact with medicine inasmuch as he has been teaching Stanford medical students for years.)

At the other end of the spectrum of FDA's constituents, the American Medical Association has declared Kennedy a good choice. And the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (PMA), which represents the drug companies the FDA regulates, is ready to expect the best. Said a PMA spokesman, "We don't really know anything at all about Kennedy. He certainly isn't 'our' candidate for the job. But absolutely everything we've been able to find out about him is good and we're very hopeful about developing a decent working relationship."

Indeed, Kennedy was not PMA's candidate, nor that of any special interest group with ties to the FDA. In fact, he got the job in a slightly round-about way. If he was anyone's candidate for a position in the new Administration, he was the choice of members of the local scientific establishment, including David A. Hamburg, president of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. Hamburg and others urged HEW Secretary Califano to see Kennedy but the job they had in mind at first was assistant secretary for health. However, after talking the matter over, Califano

and Kennedy apparently agreed that the assistant secretary, whose main function during the next 4 years will be to take on organized medicine as HEW tries to contain rising medical costs and promote National Health Insurance at the same time, really should be an M.D. So, Califano asked Kennedy to take on the job of running FDA which, it is generally agreed, is about as contentious and challenging a position as that of HEW Secretary itself.

As far as FDA commissioners go, there is little doubt that Kennedy is a different breed of cat. He has thrived in the intellectual domain of basic research for which he has been well rewarded. At 45, Kennedy is in ways the "establishment scientist" incarnate: a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine, and the American Philosophical Association, which admits only a small number of the nation's scholars to its ranks. Washington lawyer Peter Barton Hutt, who was for several years chief counsel to the FDA, says with characteristic exuberance that Kennedy's appointment "upgrades the FDA beyond anyone's wildest hopes."

But Kennedy is not all academic. During the past few years he has taken an active interest in politics, manifested most recently by his willingness, even eagerness, to shuttle between Washington and Palo Alto in order to be senior consultant to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). In that capacity, he says, he helped create an office that has a "sound structure" so that it could get off to a running start with either a Democratic or Republican president. Furthermore, by his very presence he reminded everyone that, although physical scientists have dominated the White House science policy scene for 20 years, the life sciences count too. As far as specific issues go, Kennedy recently has devoted considerable energy to agriculture. He was active in a national academy analysis of the effects of pesticides on health and the environment, and he deserves some of the credit for establishing within the Department of Agriculture a brand new program to expand its support of basic research.

Thus Kennedy comes to FDA with a reasonable amount of Washington experience and impeccable scientific credentials. He says he comes "with his eyes open" to the problems of the agency but most Washington hands agree that there is no way one can fully comprehend what FDA is all about if the closest one has been to it is Palo Alto.

Kennedy says he comes to FDA without an "agenda," and without the illusion that he is a "man on horseback" with the power to set things right. And he readily concedes he has a lot to learn. What he does hope at present is that he will be able to recruit good people to the agency. (That is the constant hope of all FDA commissioners but some observers believe that Kennedy's personal stature in science will give him a leg up in this regard.) And he hopes to do something to improve the FDA's dismal morale. He recognizes it has been for the past couple of years an agency "under siege" during a period of controversial outside investigation into internal policy. "Nobody can be expected to work well in that kind of atmosphere," Kennedy told *Science*, "and nobody should have to."

Kennedy's appointment does not require Senate confirmation, just FBI clearance which he expects any day. Then, his initiation begins.—BARBARA J. CULLITON