Fredrickson Resigns from NIH

His departure for "personal, not political" reasons takes the biomedical research community by surprise

On Friday morning 19 June, Donald S. Fredrickson announced his resignation as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). "This is not the easiest time I have appeared before you," he told a stunned gathering of NIH scientists. Even close friends who knew he had been thinking seriously of leaving NIH were surprised by his decision, coming as it did just shortly before President Ronald Reagan was slated to announce his reappointment.

In his farewell address to the NIH campus, Fredrickson said, "The cycle of renewal must begin again—it is the nature of the place. . . . This July, I am completing my fourth seven-year term at NIH [never mind that NIH has no such thing as "terms"]. It seems as exhilarating and worthwhile as in the summer of 1953, when I arrived. The last six years, however, have been spent in the relentless company of the administrative burdens of the Director. It is time to shed them for a while, lest I forget completely how to be a scientist and a physician."

Having decided to shed administrative burdens, Fredrickson decided to do so with dispatch. He will depart NIH on the first of July. As one Fredrickson stalwart quipped, "He didn't even give us 2 weeks' notice."

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News of Fredrickson's resignation elicited consternation at what some see as a decision to abandon ship just when the biomedical community needs him most. "There's a feeling of letting the community down at a crucial time," said one member of the NIH director's advisory committee after he'd had a day to digest the news. "Why did he have to quit now?" he asked.

But the news also elicited rounds of praise. "Fredrickson has led the NIH through a number of troubled periods," said Julius Krevans, dean of the University of California at San Francisco and chairman of the Association of American Medical Colleges. "Though we haven't always agreed with him point for point, no one ever doubted for a moment that his goal was an NIH that could serve science and society. More than anything he earned the confidence of the biomedical community." Washington attorney Peter Barton Hutt, who also serves on the director's advisory committee, declared, "If ever a person were made for a job, Don was made to head NIH."

And George A. Keyworth, science adviser to the President, called Fredrickson "the embodiment of excellence." It was Keyworth who recently helped negotiate Fredrickson's reappointment through the White House hierarchy. Plainly upset by Fredrickson's decision to leave, Keyworth said nonetheless that he "had to respect Don's personal desires. One should not underestimate the burdens of a job like that."

Fredrickson, whose research expertise is in blood lipids and coronary disease, has spent most of his professional life at NIH. From 1966 to 1968 he was director of what was then simply called the National Heart Institute, an administrative position he shed in 1969 in order to get back to research as director of intramural research at the institute which, by that time, had "Lung" added to its name.

In 1974 Fredrickson surprised everyone when he left NIH to become president of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences. At the IOM, he said in an interview with *Science* at the time, he had learned to "see the tensions that exist between those whose interests are in health care delivery and those who care about basic research." But after just 1 year in that job, Fredrickson left to return to NIH when the directorship unexpectedly became available after the firing of Robert Stone. "I came here [to IOM] planning to stay. But I guess I knew that I'd go back to NIH one day if the opportunity came. I just didn't think it would come so soon," he mused before he headed back to Bethesda to assume the role of "architect and spokesman for biomedical research."

Donald S. Fredrickson

"It's time to go . . ."

So it would seem that Fredrickson and NIH were meant for each other. Indeed, when he told Health and Human Services Secretary Richard S. Schweicker of his intention to leave, Fredrickson wrote, "As you know, I take this step with great ambivalence, for NIH is in the very marrow of my bones."

Why, then, did he decide to go? In a long and wide-ranging conversation with *Science* on the afternoon of his resignation announcement, Fredrickson tried to explain. There were lots of reasons, none of them singly compelling but adding up quite simply to a feeling that "It is just time to go."

For the past several months, Fredrickson has been looking at other jobs—a

0036-8075/81/0703-0111$00.50/0

college presidency and the chancellorship of a medical school among them. None fit, but the looking in itself was testimony to a kind of restlessness. At times, the urge to depart seemed strongest at moments when dealing with former Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) secretaries Joseph Califano and Patricia Harris was most trying. But that is not the explanation, he said, because there were times when those dealings were stimulating too.

And certainly wrestling with the major challenges confronting NIH during the past 6 years, and sometimes winning, "brought satisfaction to the soul." Fredrickson points with pride to the way the long and often tedious battle over recombinant DNA guidelines turned out in the end. "We managed to protect society without destroying research," he says.

When Califano, in 1978, came up with the notion that NIH should devise a set of "health research principles," Fredrickson seized the opportunity to "channel Joe's great energy" into something more concrete and came out with a commitment from HEW, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Congress to "stabilize" funding of investigator-initiated grants at no fewer than 5000 a year. This stabilization plan is meant to protect this kind of research in an environment in which more and more money could go into "targeted" programs.

Ever since 1971, Fredrickson has been talking about the need to pay more attention to delivering care on an out-patient basis. "The ultimate synthesis of medicine and molecular biology," he called it then. Now, a decade later, the $105 million NIH Ambulatory Care Research Facility is about to be dedicated. "It is," says Fredrickson, "the laboratory in which a more 'humanistic biology,' so often demanded by the critics of intensive reductionism, can be created and tested." Which is to say, NIH is about to embark on a major study of the ways in which the most sophisticated of care can be delivered to people without hospitalization, thereby saving health care dollars and the patient's psyche at the same time. The new facility will also enable NIH to expand considerably the numbers of patients it can enroll in research protocols every year.

With such accomplishments to one's credit, why leave? "I think I'd like to have time for a second career," Fredrickson told *Science*. "And if I'm going to do that, I'd better get started." (Fredrickson is 56.) "I think I might like to teach," he said. "I know, you're going to say, 'Teach what?' I don't know. I think too I'd like to go back to research, back to being a scientist. But I don't know if I can. I still think like a scientist, but I don't really know if I could go back to the lab. And then there's that book in each of us waiting to be written. I'm not sure. But I know I need some time for decompression, a chance to lower my metabolic rate and think. I need a sabbatical, and the only way you can get that in this job is to resign or die. I chose the former."

Fredrickson will take his sabbatical at the National Academy of Sciences, where incoming Academy president Frank Press has asked him to be a visiting scholar.

Although aspects of the NIH director's job continued to seem challenging, others lost their allure, Fredrickson noted by way of explaining the decision to seek a second career. The budget is a case in point. "After you've reworked the same budget five times and fought about it with OMB and done it year after year, it becomes repetitive, not exciting," he observed quite reasonably. "It is the kind of administrative burden I'm ready to be free of."

Once it became clear to Fredrickson that a decision to leave NIH was in the making, the job of recruiting for some of the institutes' key vacancies became a serious problem for him. "There are important jobs here that need to be filled, and I couldn't honestly recruit once I knew I might not be here as ballast for the people I'd bring in."

Among the vacancies are these:

- Robert Goldberger, who as deputy director for scientific research at NIH, had responsibility for the intramural research program, will leave on 1 July to become vice president for health affairs at Columbia University. He will be replaced on an acting basis by longtime NIHer Joseph E. (Ed) Rall and by John Eberhart, who will be a special assistant to the deputy director for research after his retirement as scientific director of the National Institute of Mental Health.
- Robert Levy, who has resigned as director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to become dean of Tufts University medical school.
- Donald Tower, who is retiring as director of the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke.
- Norman Kretchmer, who is expected soon to announce his departure as director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to take a joint appointment in nutrition and pediatrics at the University of California at Berkeley and at San Francisco.

Although it might seem that NIH is falling apart, Fredrickson notes that "there were more vacancies when I became director in 1975." But filling those vacancies has become increasingly difficult. Salary limitations are one factor. With a top salary of $50,100 a year, and a bonus of $10,000 a year for MD's, institute directors make considerably less than their counterparts in medical schools. Conflict-of-interest rules, which preclude accepting fees for lectures and the like, impose another restriction that some find bothersome after a while. Although Fredrickson is not leaving for financial reasons, he does admit that they were a factor in his own decision, and experience confirms that many able people turn down NIH jobs because they can't afford to take them.

While the White House searches for a successor, the biomedical community, which has a natural tendency toward anxiety, will hold its collective breath. Already, researchers have expressed their fear that scientifically irrelevant factors, such as one's views on abortion, will enter into the decision-making. At the same time, there are upbeat rumors in Washington that there will be an outside advisory committee of distinguished scientists to help guide the search. In fact, there are, as yet, no plans at all.

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Once Fredrickson made his decision, he acted quickly. He informed Secretary Schweicker on Tuesday night and told science adviser Keyworth on Wednesday. The public announcement came on Friday. There has been no time for planning, and as of this writing it is not even clear whether Thomas Malone, who is deputy director of NIH, will be named acting director while the search for a replacement goes on.

The only clue to the future comes from Keyworth, who presumably will have a say in the choice of Fredrickson's successor. Keyworth, who appreciates the sense of "confidence" Fredrickson inspired among the biomedical community because of his dedication to NIH, told *Science* that he thinks the next director must have the "same sense of institutional loyalty." Perhaps the President will agree.—BARBARA J. CULLITON