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Assistant Secretary for Health: This Time the Job Is on Trial

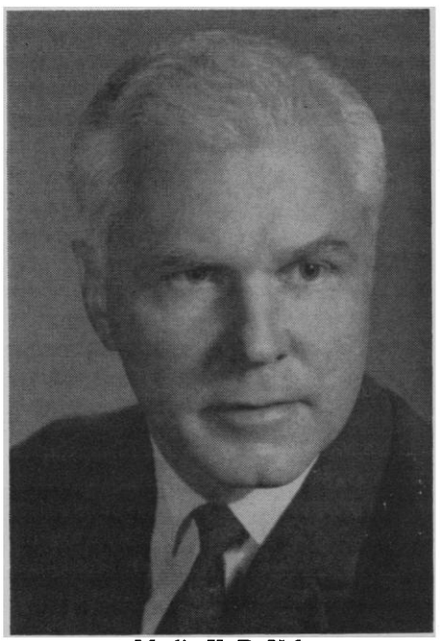
The assistant secretary for health and scientific affairs in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) is nominally the Administration's top health official, but the post lacks the status and powers to make the occupant federal health chief in any effective sense. Furthermore, since President Nixon took office, no subcabinet post has proved more embarrassing to the Administration or uncomfortable for the incumbent. So much so, in fact, that, when Merlin K. DuVal, Jr., dean of the University of Arizona medical school, was nominated last month to succeed Roger O. Egeberg in the job, the resulting comment centered more on the job than on the men.

The awkwardness for the Administration began when appointment of former HEW Secretary Robert Finch's initial choice for the health job, John H. Knowles, director of Massachusetts General Hospital, was stymied by the American Medical Association (*Science*, 11 April 1969). The matter hung fire for 6 months until Egeberg, dean of the University of Southern California medical school, agreed to step into the breach.

The bluff and genial Egeberg earned a friendly reception on Capitol Hill and was rated a capable Administration emissary on the national health circuit, but he seems to have made little impact on policy or budget decisions. Getting a hearing at the White House reportedly proved difficult for him, and it is said that one appointment was canceled at the Oval-Room door when Egeberg acknowledged that he intended to raise the question of financing.

Starting about a year ago, rumors of Egeberg's imminent departure began drifting around Washington. Last summer, after Elliot L. Richardson replaced Finch as HEW Secretary, however, Egeberg made it known he was an admirer of Richardson's abilities and was more optimistic about his own role at HEW. Then, this spring, the rumors waxed again and Egeberg admitted he was tired but was willing to stay on the job until a successor was found. Egeberg will remain at HEW as a consultant to Richardson.

The man nominated to replace Egeberg has, since 1964, been at the University of Arizona medical school, which graduates its first class this spring. He is reputed to have been a "strong" dean at Arizona, and the adjectives commonly used to describe him include "articulate, handsome, forceful." DuVal has been active in the affairs of the Association of American Medical Colleges and is currently chairman of the AAMC's council of deans. He also has been enthusiastically endorsed by officials of the American Medical Association at both state and national levels, and so he seems to have the undivided approval of organized medicine. He has indicated that, philosophically, he is in accord with the Administration's general position that health care should be improved primarily by strengthening the existing system. DuVal is apparently taking the HEW job with his eyes wide open. He is quoted as saying that the job is on trial, and he expects that, after 18 months or so, an assessment will be made on the future of the post.



Merlin K. DuVal

The limitations on the health post are regarded by many as congenital. The assistant secretaryship was created in the late 1960's after several major programs in the health sector had been legislated and subordinate agencies had established power relationships with Congress and the upper echelons of the Executive. Even more significant, the two biggest federal health programs, Medicare and Medicaid, are not under the jurisdiction of the assistant secretary. And, most important, major policy questions in the health field, such as decisions on national health insurance, the new cancer program, and medical manpower programs, are being settled in the Secretary's office and the White House.

Creation of a subcabinet post for health was a response to the multiplication of health and biomedical research programs and the rapid increase in budgets during the 1960's. The total budget for health services and research was about $1.4 billion in 1963 and will be an estimated $16 billion in 1972. About two-thirds of that $16 billion would go into the financing of health services programs, notably Medicare and Medicaid, but growth has also been rapid in the sectors which the assistant secretary administers, such as biomedical research, medical manpower training, and programs of specialized medical services.

Until the 1960's, the federal health

establishment consisted mainly of agencies responsible for conventional public health functions and medical research. These agencies shared a habit of independence and a tradition of being run by career professionals. The dominant force was the Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Corps, a quasi-military career service of physicians, dentists, and sanitary engineers. PHS had managed the successful growth of the National Institutes of Health, but critics noted that under postwar conditions the Commissioned Corps often acted more like a fraternal organization than an enterprising administrative elite.

By the mid 1960's, HEW policy makers had concluded that PHS provided an inadequate base for the expansion of federal health functions, and, under Secretary John Gardner and his health affairs adviser Philip R. Lee, HEW moved toward reorganization. For much of the decade there were desultory discussions about either creating a separate Department of Health with the Secretary in the Cabinet or reorganizing HEW on the plan of the Department of Defense by creating a trio of undersecretaries for health, education, and welfare. President Johnson decided to ask Congress to establish a new assistant secretaryship for health and scientific affairs in 1967. After two internal reorganizations, the assistant secretary wound up with responsibility for agencies grouped under the National Institutes of Health, the Health Services and Mental Health Administration, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In the process the National Institute of Mental Health was moved under the jurisdiction of the Social and Rehabilitation Service. The Surgeon General, titular head of the PHS Commissioned Corps, became a deputy to the new assistant secretary. Lee was appointed the first assistant secretary for health and scientific affairs and the shakedown period seemed to be going promisingly. Lee appeared to have good working relations with the White House and the Democratic Congress, and, although he had his differences with his agency heads, they seemed to share the same goals. Lee and others now say that, in retrospect, the timing of the reorganization was bad. The presidential election and the change of administration occurred within a year after the big reorganization. Whatever prospect there has been for consolidating the assistant secretary's position went glimmering during the impasse over the Knowles appointment. Bureaucracy abhors a power vacuum, and the agencies reaffirmed their old ties with their patrons in Congress and the Executive. Egeberg came in at a time when budget cuts were depressing morale in his fief and Administration budget policies restricted his initiatives.

Furthermore, Egeberg found that a lot of old issues had not really been decided. A main aim of the Gardner reorganization, for example, had been the dethronement of the PHS Commissioned Corps, but the corps proved to have more staying power than the reorganizers anticipated. The fate of the PHS hospitals, founded to provide care for merchant seamen, is proving to be a thorny issue and the whole matter of the corps is again under high-level scrutiny.

Staffing Problems

To add to the difficulties, the assistant secretary's office is generally regarded as understaffed. The office is allocated about 100 staff "slots," but this figure is misleading since about half of these staffers are assigned fixed responsibilities such as dealing with mail, handling international health matters, and carrying out some of the statutory responsibilities of the Surgeon General, as, for example, supervising shipment of hazardous materials. About half of those remaining are secretaries, so the assistant secretary has about 25 professionals to deploy as he wishes. He has "line" authority over his agencies, which means he is responsible for planning and implementing decisions on major policy, for review of the budget, and for monitoring the performance of his agencies. In addition, he is expected to serve the Secretary in a staff capacity as health adviser and troubleshooter. And in the health field there has been plenty of trouble. In recent months Egeberg and his staff have been confronted with such socially important and politically sensitive issues as national health insurance and health manpower legislation, a study of medical malpractice problems, and the cancer research program, which has become a White House project. Add to this the chronic crisis of the FDA and the necessity to develop position papers and to testify on a wide variety of legislative proposals on Capitol Hill, and there seems some basis for the understaffing diagnosis. The assistant secretary can and does delegate problems to subordinate agencies and borrow staffers from his constituent agencies for special jobs, but agency loyalties can create conflicts of interest for talent on loan. DuVal presumably, at least, will not have to contend with one handicap: rumor made Egeberg a long-term lame duck, and that made recruiting difficult.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the dilemma of the assistant secretary better than Egeberg's experience with the "health options" study (*Science*, 25 September 1970), which led up to the President's health message in January. Major responsibility was given to Egeberg's office, and feverish activity ensued last fall. What happened, says one observer, is that the agencies pushed their pet projects and produced a "Sears Roebuck catalogue" containing too many options. The final product, it is said, had to be shaped by Richardson and his lieutenants.

All of this may mean that the assistant secretary's post is going through an awkward stage. The Administration is in the midst of negotiations with Congress on some fundamental pieces of social policy—including national health insurance—and the time simply may not be politically right for anointing a federal health chief, a "top doctor" whose job would be to set policy and coordinate programs for an expanded health system.

A danger is that national health insurance may be viewed primarily as a formula for financing health care, as was the case with Medicare and Medicaid. Unless medical policy for national health insurance is made to mesh with federal programs for medical manpower, health maintenance organizations, and even medical research, a major health insurance initiative will only multiply the problems of Medicare and Medicaid.

The public role played by presidential science adviser Edward E. David in championing the Administration version of the proposed major cancer program has caused speculation that David and his Office of Science and Technology may take a stronger hand in health policy matters. HEW Secretary Richardson, however, remains the chief negotiator with Congress in health, education, and welfare matters. As such, he has his hands full and observers question whether he will have time to turn his vaunted administrative talents to the task of bringing order to the sprawling HEW bureaucracy, a task in which his admirers felt he could succeed.

As for the job of health assistant

secretary, Richardson is said to have in mind his own reorganization of that office. Realistically, the options are either to decisively strengthen or to decisively weaken the office. Reportedly, Richardson's aim is to make the constituent health agencies more responsive to the Secretary's office. The word is that what he wants in the assistant secretary's office is essentially an administrator. The months ahead will show whether DuVal is in Washington to help effect such a change.

Richardson, after a year at HEW, retains his reputation as a formidable administrator, and HEW looks as intractable an administrative problem as ever. As Egeberg told a group of reporters at an informal meeting early this spring, "If anybody can reorganize HEW, it is Secretary Richardson. The main question is, Can he reorganize it so anybody who succeeds him can keep it organized?"—JOHN WALSH

Energy: President Asks $3 Billion for Breeder Reactor, Fuel Studies

For several months, advisers to President Nixon have reportedly been hunting for a new "technological initiative" to revitalize the nation's languishing science and engineering communities. Now it appears that the President may have found his "new Apollo" in the form of a program costing far less, yet promising a more immediate social payoff, than the landing of men on the moon. As Nixon described it in a major message to Congress last week, his new program seeks to invest some $3 billion in federal funds over the next decade to develop new sources of "clean energy" from fossil and nuclear fuels.

In a 5000-word statement released on 4 June, the President outlined a broad array of fuel policy changes, research and development efforts, and attempts to foster consumer conservation of energy. All of this, he said, was aimed at achieving what have traditionally been two incompatible goals—feeding the nation's expanding appetite for electric power and petroleum, while reducing the air and water pollution, and the degradation of the land from mining and drilling, that inexorably result.

The energy message was, as he told a White House news conference, "the first comprehensive energy statement by a president." Accordingly, it contained something for nearly everyone.

There were sops to the environmentalists who have called for measures to conserve electricity and to minimize the release of heat and radioactive pollutants from nuclear power plants. There were promises to the fossil fuel industry of new efforts to overcome the hurdle of sulfur contamination that currently restricts the use of domestic oil and coal supplies, and there were rich promises to expand offshore oil leasing and to consider opening the vast shale oil lands of Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah to test-site leasing. But clearly the core of the President's message, and a plum for the nuclear industry, was a plea to Congress for a $2-billion commitment to develop a commercial, fast breeder nuclear reactor by 1980.

"Our best hope today for meeting the nation's growing demand for clean energy lies with the fast breeder reactor," the President said. "We have very high hopes that the breeder reactor will soon become a key element in the national fight against air and water pollution. . . . I believe it important to the nation that the commercial demonstration of a breeder reactor be completed by 1980."

Nixon Outlines His Energy Plan,

The President's package of new fuel policies and research for "clean energy" derives from a series of recommendations made to him—but not released to the public—by the energy subcommittee of the Domestic Council. The following is an outline of the President's program, adapted from a White House summary:

R & D for Clean Energy

Sulfur Oxide Control Technology

An increase of $15 million for FY 72 making a total of $26 million available to develop and demonstrate, in partnership with industry, the technology for removing sulfur from the stack gases of power plants and industrial plants burning coal and oil.

Nuclear Breeder Reactor

A commitment to complete the successful demonstration of the liquid metal fast breeder reactor by 1980. To accomplish this, a supplemental request for $27 million in operating funds for the base program will be made for FY 72. An additional $50 million will be requested for the federal cash contribution to the jointly funded demonstration plant.

Coal Gasification

An expanded cooperative pilot plant program totalling $30 million per year aimed at making coal gasification a commercial reality. The Office of Coal Research program would be expanded to $20 million, almost doubling its existing program, while industry has agreed to provide $10 million.

Ongoing Research and Development

The federal government is funding other energy R & D such as coal mine health and safety, fusion power, magnetohydrodynamics, underground electric transmission, and use of solar energy.