Trump set to tap Georgia health commissioner as CDC head

President Trump is expected to tap the head of Georgia Department of Public Health as the new director of the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald is said to be deep in discussions to lead the sprawling agency. The negotiations are not finalized and several administrative hurdles remain before an official announcement is made. Fitzgerald would succeed Dr. Anne Schuchat, who became the CDC's acting director in January 2017 after Dr. Tom Frieden resigned. The role is one of the most prominent in public health and in metro Atlanta: The CDC has thousands of employees and several campuses across the city.

Trained as an obstetrician-gynecologist, Fitzgerald has served as the commissioner of Georgia's public health department since her 2011 appointment by Gov. Nathan Deal and oversees a range of health programs, including the state’s emergency medical response and infectious disease and immunization initiatives.

If she’s tapped for the position, which does not require Senate confirmation, Fitzgerald would inherit several immediate concerns and vexing long-term problems. Health officials have warned of a potential resurgence in the Zika virus, even though cases of the mosquito-borne illnesses have dropped sharply since last year. And the agency is the target of deep spending cuts under Trump’s spending proposal. His budget draft would have cut the CDC’s budget by $1.2 billion, which health experts warned could hamper the agency’s disease-fighting efforts and immunization programs. Lawmakers in May ended up approving a small funding increase for the CDC over last year’s levels, but some of that money was taken from an internal account that previously provided Georgia with roughly $20 million a year for immunization programs and other initiatives.

Fitzgerald is no newcomer to politics. She served as a health care policy advisor to House Speaker Newt Gingrich and U.S. Sen. Paul Coverdell, both Republicans. She twice ran unsuccessfully for Congress, in 1992 and 1994, both times as a Republican.

Fitzgerald has led the Department of Public Health since Georgia lawmakers carved it out as a separate agency after decades of consolidation with other departments. She’s maintained a quiet profile in her post, which oversees a $671 million agency, though at times the job has put her in the spotlight. She was the face of the Deal administration’s effort to combat the spread of the Zika and Ebola viruses, and helped reduce wait times for a program that provides life-saving medications to thousands of uninsured Georgians with HIV or AIDS. Fitzgerald also drew headlines for a decision to rescind a job offer to a California physician initially offered a
job as a north Georgia health director after reports surfaced about controversial sermons he made condemning gay rights and the theory of evolution.

**RESEARCH CORNER**

Jill Slansky’s research focuses on the adaptive immune system and how it interacts with cancers. Her research program involves understanding signals from the tumor microenvironment that influence T cell activity, designing tumor-specific vaccines that signal through antigen receptors of T cells, and understanding the T cell repertoire that responds to tumors. Using mouse tumor models, she and her lab have developed strong expertise in detection and activation of tumor-specific T cells. They have established effective methods of stimulating the endogenous repertoire of tumor-specific T cells to kill tumors. They developed rules that determine what peptides best activate effective T cells and how to use these peptide antigens to activate T cells typically considered to be ineffective to the antitumor response. This research led to asking a similar question in human antitumor T cells. They have analyzed T cell receptor sequences that are similar in many human breast cancer patients and are working to understand the antigens that these receptors bind.

These interests lead Dr. Slansky to help conceive of the Human Immune Monitoring Shared Resource on campus, part of the human immunology initiative supported by Transformational Research Funding from the Dean. Although the facility may have hatched from tumor immunology interests, it is intended to help with all immunology-based clinical and translational research studies.

Dr. Slansky, Professor of Immunology and Microbiology, received her PhD in Oncology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her postdoctoral training in Tumor Immunology from Dr. Drew Pardoll at Johns Hopkins University. She has been at the School of Medicine since 2002. Originally housed at National Jewish Health, she moved to AMC with the Department of Immunology to join Microbiology in 2014. Here she continues her research and hosts a twice monthly Tumor Immunology series (please contact her for details if you are interested in attending this series).

**KUDOS**

Kudos to Katherine Fantauzzo, PhD., Assistant Professor in the Department of Craniofacial Biology at the School of Dental Medicine. Her research proposal and her Mallinckrodt Grant application entitled “Modeling RTK biological specificity: Characterization of PDGFR dimer-specific dynamics in the craniofacial mesenchyme” was chosen by our Research Review Committee to be submitted to the Edward J. Mallinckrodt Jr. Foundation. The aim of her proposal is to employ innovative technologies in the field of growth factor signaling to examine the vivo dynamics of platelet derived growth factor and receptor (PDGFR) and dimer specific formation as well as the resulting effects on intracellular signaling and gene expression in the craniofacial mesenchyme. She hypothesize that the various PDGFR dimers have different patterns of expression and beyond affinities and further that each dimer binds to a unique complement of intercellular signaling molecules to generate distinct cellular output during mid face development. Good Luck Katherine.