

Former New York Health Commissioner Picked to Lead F.D.A.

By GARDINER HARRIS New York Times March 12, 2009

WASHINGTON — President Obama intends to nominate Dr. Margaret A. Hamburg, a former New York City health commissioner, to lead the Food and Drug Administration, sidestepping a battle between drug safety advocates and the drug industry, according to people briefed on the decision.

The administration is likely to announce the decision this week, these people said. Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, the health commissioner of Baltimore, who led the Obama administration's transition team for the F.D.A., will become Dr. Hamburg's chief deputy, these people said.

Dr. Hamburg, 53, succeeds Dr. Andrew C. von Eschenbach, who led the beleaguered agency from 2005 until last January and often had to deflect critics who accused the Bush administration of letting politics play too forceful a role in science policy.

Her selection, first reported Wednesday on the The Wall Street Journal's Web site, was hailed by top public health officials and experts.

"Peggy has a deep commitment to the public health and, while she appreciates the vital role of industry, will surely focus on what is best for the public," said Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg, president of the Institute of Medicine, the medical arm of the National Academy of Sciences.

Dr. Hamburg, who was appointed by Mayor David N. Dinkins as acting commissioner in 1991 and became commissioner the following year, was one of the few top officials asked to remain when Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani took office in 1994. She was best known for developing a tuberculosis control program that produced sharp declines in the incidence of the disease in New York. Under her tenure, child immunization rates rose in the city.

She left New York in 1997 to become assistant secretary for planning and evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services, where she created a bioterrorism initiative and led planning for pandemic flu response.

That background makes her a more obvious candidate to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention than the F.D.A.

Indeed, the Obama administration considered experts more steeped in the kind of drug safety issues that the food and drug agency confronts daily, including Dr. Steven E.

Nissen, a cardiologist from the Cleveland Clinic, and Dr. Robert M. Califf, a cardiologist from Duke University.

But Dr. Nissen and Dr. Califf would have been divisive candidates, with rival supporting camps. Dr. Hamburg's selection avoids the usual debate between industry and consumer advocates.

"She has the personal skills to collaborate with the pharmaceutical industry and the science community in a way that isn't confrontational," said Dr. Georges C. Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

Jeffrey Levi, executive director of Trust for America's Health, a nonprofit public health organization, said Dr. Hamburg had revived a demoralized and cash-starved agency in New York and could do the same at the F.D.A., which faces similar problems.

"Right now," he said, "the F.D.A. needs a strong leader with a clear sense of mission who can fight for the resources that the agency needs and do it in a bipartisan manner."

Dr. Hamburg is the daughter of Dr. David A. Hamburg, a former president of the Institute of Medicine and a longtime force in public health. She has two teenage children and serves on the board of the Sidwell Friends School.

Mr. Dinkins recalled that Dr. Hamburg forced him to take a tuberculosis test after he spoke at a disaster scene with someone who later tested positive for the disease.

"She took care of me like a newborn," he said. "She's the kind of person you figure can do almost anything."