National Cancer Institute Director Dr Harold Varmus Stepping Down

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Harold Varmus, MD, is stepping down as director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) after nearly 5 years. His last day on the job will be March 31, 2015.

Douglas Lowy, MD, current deputy director at NCI, has been named acting director for NCI beginning April 1, 2015. Dr Lowy received the National Medal of Technology and Innovation from President Obama in 2014 for his research that led to the development of the human papillomavirus vaccine, NIH notes in the statement.

During his tenure as NCI director, Dr Varmus instituted the Provocative Questions initiative, created NCI's new Center for Global Health, revitalized the cooperative clinical trials system, launched an initiative to find drugs that target the cell-signaling pathway controlled by the RAS oncogene, led the cancer component of the Precision Medicine Initiative, and contributed many other important ideas to biomedical research, according to an NIH release.

"It has been our great fortune to have Harold at the helm of the NCI," NIH Director Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, said in the release. "His breadth and depth of expertise in biomedical research is unparalleled, and he's been a tremendous colleague to me and invaluable to the agency."

"Mixture of Regret and Anticipation"

Dr Varmus was corecipient of the 1989 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for "discovery of the cellular origin of retroviral oncogenes." He received the National...
Dr Varmus served as the director of NIH under President Bill Clinton from 1993 to 1999. After leaving NIH and before returning to lead NCI in 2010, Dr Varmus served as president of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Before President Barack Obama appointed Dr Varmus to head NCI, he named him cochair of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

Dr Varmus has had a "long-standing association with NIH, dating back to 1968-1970 when, as a young Public Health Service officer, he studied bacterial gene expression with Ira Pastan, MD, who is currently chief of NCI's Laboratory of Molecular Biology," NIH notes.

In a letter to NCI staff, grantees, and advisors, Dr Varmus said he takes this step with a "mixture of regret and anticipation. Regret, because I will miss this job and my working relationships with so many dedicated and talented people. Anticipation, because I look forward to new opportunities to pursue scientific work in the city, New York, that I continue to call home."

Upon returning to New York City, Dr Varmus said he plans to establish a "modestly sized" research laboratory in the Meyer Cancer Center at Weill Cornell Medical College and serve as a senior advisor to the dean. He'll also assist the recently founded New York Genome Center as it develops its research and service functions and helps regional institutions introduce genomics into cancer care.

On the appointment of Dr Lowy as acting director, Dr Varmus said: "The NCI will be in excellent hands."