DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH QUITS POST, CITING PERSONAL REASONS/N.Y.Times/6-20-81/P.39

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WASHINGTON, June 19 — Dr. Donald S. Fredrickson announced today his resignation as director of the National Institutes of Health, the Federal agency that has given the United States a dominant position in biomedical research.

Dr. Fredrickson's resignation for "personal reasons" was initially disclosed to about 550 employees at the end of a morning meeting on the agency's compound in suburban Bethesda, Md. The widely respected 56-year-old expert on blood fats said that the agency seemed "as exhilarating and worthwhile as in the summer of 1953 when I arrived."

He added: "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."

Dr. Fredrickson then read his letter of resignation to President Reagan, asking to be allowed to leave the agency on July 1. A second letter to Richard S. Schweiker, Secretary of Health and Human Services, said, "I take this step with great ambivalence, for N.I.H. is in the very marrow of my bones."

Not 'a Political Decision'

In a telephone interview later, Dr. Fredrickson denied that he was leaving because of unhappiness with Reagan Administration health policies and appointments.

"This is by no means a political decision," said Dr. Fredrickson. He said Mr. Schweiker had asked him to remain in charge of the National Institutes of Health. However, he said, "after six years in such a job, you wonder whether you'll retain the freshness and keen reflexes to do this kind of complex work."

What sped his decision, he said, was the realization that several major jobs at the agency were opening, including the directorships of two of the 11 institutes that occupy the campuslike compound.

"I had to assure them I'd be here, and I couldn't," said Dr. Fredrickson.

With a budget of about $3.4 billion, the agency supports thousands of medical and biological research projects, both on their home grounds and at universities across the nation. The aim of the agency, with about 12,000 employees, is the support of biomedical research into the causes, prevention and cure of illness.

Dr. Fredrickson's resignation startled his colleagues. "It was a real surprise," said one agency employee who attended this morning's meeting. "It was short, sweet and sort of stunning."

Mr. Schweiker, in a "Dear Don" letter, expressed "profound regret" at Dr. Fredrickson's resignation. He said that under Dr. Fredrickson's direction, "the N.I.H. has faithfully and effectively" pursued the mission of transferring medical breakthroughs into actual practice to improve people's lives.

"Over the years, N.I.H.-supported research has saved countless lives through the development of new treatments and means of prevention for serious health problems affecting people throughout the world," said Mr. Schweiker. "This department, this nation and the world owe you a great debt."

Dr. Fredrickson said in the interview that he was leaving the $65,000-a-year post to work, initially, as a visiting scholar with the National Academy of Sciences. He said his long-term plans were uncertain.

A department spokesman said there was no word on Dr. Fredrickson's replacement.

Even before his appointment as director of the agency, Dr. Fredrickson was an internationally known expert on blood lipids, or fats, and an internist who had conducted significant studies of blood fats and their links to heart disease.

Key Contributions Cited

Perhaps his key contribution as director of the agency, Dr. Fredrickson said, was the development of guidelines in the rapidly growing field of genetic research and gene-splicing.

"Through the labyrinth we managed to avoid restrictive statutes and we emerged with the public safety and the science both intact," said Dr. Fredrickson. "We were trying to keep the public interest foremost yet protect the opportunity for this revolutionary new technology to be efficiently developed."

Gene-splicing is the process of manipulating the genetic material of cells, the deoxyribonucleic aid, or DNA, to create new life forms.

A second key contribution, he said, was the development of a discussion process in which doctors, patients, scientists and others evaluate new technologies and analyze, in Dr. Fredrickson's words, "the risks and benefits, their capacities to save lives as opposed to creating hazards."