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# Ex-New York Health Commissioner Is F.D.A. Pick

By [GARDINER HARRIS](#)

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, people briefed on the decision said.

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, said these people, who were not authorized to speak publicly.

Dr. Hamburg, 53, will succeed 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.

The food and drug agency regulates more than \$1 trillion worth of consumer goods, which amounts to about 25 cents of every consumer dollar spent in this country. Besides policing billions in food, drug, cosmetic and vitamin sales, it is responsible for monitoring a third of all imported goods, items as varied as eggplants, eyeliners, microwave ovens, monoclonal [antibodies](#) and cellphones.

The F.D.A. is arguably the most important public health agency in the country, but its budget has lagged far behind those of agencies like the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). A growing list of scandals has led a bipartisan chorus on Capitol Hill to demand major changes and larger budgets, with some legislators advocating that the F.D.A. be split in two.

Dr. Hamburg's selection, first reported Wednesday on 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 incidences 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 federal

[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.

Peter J. Pitts, a former F.D.A. associate commissioner who is president of the Center for Medicine in the Public Interest, an industry-sponsored advocacy group, said the selection of Drs. Hamburg and Sharfstein suggested that the Obama administration supported splitting the agency.

"I think Dr. Hamburg will become the commissioner of food, since she's a safety and security person," Mr. Pitts said, "and then Dr. Sharfstein would slide into the F.D.A., which would become the Federal Drug Administration."

Obama administration officials would not comment.

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," Mr. Levi 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 boards of Henry Schein, a medical products distributor, and the Sidwell Friends School, where the president's daughters, Malia and Sasha Obama, are students.

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."

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