Recess Appointment Makes Berwick CMS Chief

BY ALICIA AULT

President Obama announced the recess appointment of Dr. Donald Berwick to be the Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), bypassing what looked like a lengthy fight to have the nominee confirmed by the Senate.

In making the appointment, the President said in a statement, "It's unfortunate that at a time when our nation is facing enormous challenges, many in Congress have decided to delay critical nominations for political purposes."

White House spokesman Dan Pfeiffer wrote that the move was necessary because, "Many Republicans in Congress have made it clear in recent weeks that they were going to stall the nomination as long as they could, solely to score political points."

Dr. Berwick, a pediatrician who is a nationally known leader in health care quality, is supported by many health care and consumer groups, Mr. Pfeiffer noted. Dr. Berwick is president and CEO of the Cambridge, Mass.–based Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

In a statement, the American College of Physicians wrote that "Dr. Berwick's career and work at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement illustrates the drive to provide patient-centered care, patient safety, quality improvement, and care coordination in health care. He is well respected in the health-care community and known for his desire to bring constructive change to health care delivery. We share these objectives and believe Dr. Berwick will be an able Administrator and partner for change."

American Medical Association President Rich Umbdenstock wrote: "Don has dedicated his career to engaging hospitals, doctors, nurses and other health care providers to improve patient care. ... A physician and innovator in health care quality, his knowledge of the health care system makes him the right choice."

Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) also issued a statement, chiding Republicans for their "lockstep stalling" of Dr. Berwick's nomination, and praising him for his assistance in overhauling the Massachusetts health care system.

Courtesy Institute for Healthcare Improvement

Dr. Donald Berwick is a pediatrician and a leader in health care quality.

"He's first rate all the way, and throughout Massachusetts' landmark health reform, Don was there, helping lead our state to the highest rate of health care coverage in the nation," according to Sen. Kerry.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), however, was scathing in his reaction to the appointment, calling Dr. Berwick "one of the most prominent advocates of rationed health care."

"Democrats haven't scheduled so much as a committee hearing for Donald Berwick but the mere possibility of allowing the American people the opportunity to hear what he intends to do with their health care is evidently reason enough for this Administration to sneak him through without public scrutiny," Sen. McConnell said in a statement.

Under the Constitution, the President nominates individuals to serve in high-level government positions; those individuals must then be confirmed by the Senate. However, the Constitution also allows the President to make such appointments without Senate confirmation if Congress is in recess, as it currently is for the Independence Day holiday. ■