

Newsmaker: Dr. Regina M. Benjamin



Native Alabamian Dr. Regina M. Benjamin made the national news in July when President Obama announced that he would nominate her to be the next Surgeon General of the United States. Earlier this month, Dr. Benjamin's nomination was unanimously approved by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. She continues to await a confirmation vote by the full Senate. News reports indicate that the nomination is being held up because of a dispute involving the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). (The office of the Surgeon General is within HHS.)

So what does a Surgeon General do besides issue warnings about cigarettes? She is America's doctor, serving as a spokeswoman on matters of public health and advising the President and the HHS Secretary on the same. The Surgeon General is a leader, an advocate, and a teacher. Interestingly, while in office, the Surgeon General is also a vice admiral – a distinction no doubt traceable to the origination of the U.S. Public Health Service in the Marine Hospital Service.

The first Surgeon General took office in 1871, having been appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant. The first woman to be confirmed to the post was Antonia Coello Novello; she was appointed by President George H.W. Bush, and assumed office in 1990. In 1993, Joycelyn Elders, an appointee of President Bill Clinton, assumed the office. In addition, Audrey F. Manley served as Acting Surgeon General for two-and-a-half years after Elders left office. At present, Steven K. Galson is the Acting Surgeon General; he has served in that role for just over two years.

Dr. Benjamin was born in Mobile in October 1956. She attended Xavier University of Louisiana and Morehouse School of Medicine before receiving her medical degree from UAB. She did a residency in family practice in Georgia, and then returned home to Alabama to fulfill her commitment to the National Health Service Corps, which had paid for her medical schooling. "After entering solo practice in Bayou La Batre, Dr. Benjamin spent several years moonlighting in emergency rooms and nursing homes to keep her practice open." Somehow she found time to earn an MBA from Tulane University, and, thereafter, she "converted her office to a rural health clinic." www.bayouclinic.org (Staff)

Dr. Benjamin has received various awards and she serves on a host of boards and committees, many of which have little meaning to someone outside the medical field. What does have meaning is the extraordinary commitment she has shown to her patients. According to the clinic website, the clinic "will provide preventative health care and general medical services to all potential patients, regardless of ability to pay." www.bayouclinic.org (Healthcare with Dignity; Insurance). As President Obama explained it in announcing the nomination,

When people couldn't pay, she didn't charge them. When the clinic wasn't making money, she didn't take a salary for herself. When Hurricane George destroyed the clinic in 1998, she made house calls to all her patients while it was rebuilt. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed it again and left most of her town homeless, she mortgaged her house and maxed out her credit cards to rebuild that clinic for a second time. She tended to those who had been wounded in the storm, and when folks needed medicine, she asked the pharmacist to send the bill her way.

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-The-President-In-Announcement-Of-US-Surgeon-General/

Whatever comes of the present nomination and the greater healthcare / health insurance debate, Dr. Regina Benjamin is a remarkable woman who deserves a round of applause for her efforts on behalf of her patients.