

Surgeon General has Hoosier ties

By Ed Breen

When everybody is healthy, nobody much cares about the Surgeon General of the United States. It's only when we start getting sick that the doctor in the fancy uniform adorned with the scrambled eggs steps to the front.

Remember C. Everett Koop back in the '80s, during the AIDS epidemic? He went on to make a lot of money advocating against smoking, selling medication to help you kick the habit. Or Dr. Jocelyn Elders a decade later? She got into trouble by suggesting that legalizing drugs might be a way to reduce crime.

And even though the Surgeon General is not in the Navy, he or she wears a uniform that looks an awful lot like the Navy. And even though the Surgeon General is not in the Navy, he or she carries the rank of Vice Admiral.

Simple answer is that the Surgeon General is the chief operating officer — the boss — of the U. S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps,

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which looked to the Navy a couple of hundred years ago for policies and procedures and, yes, rank and uniform.

Thus is 45-year-old Jerome Michael Adams so uniformed and carries the title of Vice Admiral, and in the last two months has become the most public public health officer we have seen in a very long time, except for maybe Dr. Anthony Fouci, who is right up there with Elvis and Mickey Mantle in the icon department.

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In short, he is a part of that boatload of Hoosiers who got hauled off to Washington by Mike Pence when Pence became vice president and had to populate a government because Donald Trump didn't know anyone except New York land sharks.

Dr. Adams was then the health commissioner of Indiana, the job now held by Dr. Kristina Box, who is there at the side of Gov. Eric Holcomb in his daily briefings during the time of COVID-19.

Adams and a lot of other Indiana men and women were hauled off to Washington to run several agencies. Marc Short was a longtime gate keeper for Pence in his Indiana days and is now chief of staff to the vice president of

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the United States.

Alex Azar is another. He runs the department of Health and Human Services. So is Seema Verma. She runs the behemoth that is Medicare. Both put in periodic appearances at Trump's daily coronavirus briefing. Both are transplanted Virginians who came first to Indiana, he to work at Eli Lilly and she at Health and Hospital Corporation in Indianapolis.

But it is Surgeon General Adams, almost boy-

ish-looking, who is most often there in that West Wing auditorium to explain how we're doing in the war on the virus.

His story is pretty spectacular. Born and reared on a farm in rural Maryland, graduated from high school in 1992, earned a degree in biochemistry from the University of Maryland Baltimore and then came to Indiana on a Lilly scholarship to get his medical education at the Indiana University School of Medicine, with specialization in anesthesiology. He went on and earned a Master of Public Health degree from the University of California at Berkeley before returning to Indiana to do his internship in internal medicine at St. Vincent on the north side of Indianapolis in 2002 and his residency at the Indiana University hospital in Indianapolis from 2003 to 2006.

Only then did he move into a private medical practice and that was at Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie, a practice he maintained for two years before returning to the IU

med school as a professor of anesthesiology.

In 2014, Adams was appointed Indiana State Health Commissioner by then-Gov. Pence and was in the spotlight occasionally during the HIV outbreak in southern Indiana in 2015. He initially objected to a proposed needle exchange program on moral grounds, but later changed his mind.

He was kept as health commissioner by Gov. Holcomb until he was nominated to be Surgeon General in 2017 in the early days of the Trump administration. Two years ago he launched a campaign to promote seasonal flu vaccinations, mainly because the 2017 flu season had killed nearly 80,000 Americans, the most in the last 40 years.

By both position and inclination, he was one of the original appointees to the COVID-19 task force in February, but previously in the coronavirus onset he had been one of those who downplayed the epidemic by comparing it to seasonal flu, an error in judgment he has since acknowledged.



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