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Susan Blumenthal, M.D. [Become a fan](#)

Public Health Editor, The Huffington Post; Former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General

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Bernadine Healy, M.D.: Remembering a Pioneering Health Hero

Posted: 08/10/2011 11:04 am EDT Updated: 08/10/2011 11:04 am EDT



As we mourn the passing of [Bernadine Healy](#), M.D., the world remembers a health hero, a visionary leader and a pioneer for women and women's health. Dr. Healy died Saturday as a result of complications from cancer. She was only 67.

I had the honor and privilege of working with Dr. Healy in her leadership role as the first woman director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). There, she was a courageous champion and a source of inspiration. In 1991, as NIH director, she set a new course for the NIH, developing a strategic plan for the agency. It was her vision that led to the recruitment of a world-renowned team of experts to head the Human Genome Project and the establishment of a new National Institute on Nursing Research. She also spearheaded the landmark Women's Health Initiative, the "mother of all clinical trials," a \$625 million study conducted in more than 40 sites nationwide to study diseases in post-menopausal women as

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well as strategies to promote a healthier future. The largest clinical trial ever conducted, this research was also the first prospective study on hormone replacement therapy resulting in a sea change in how these medications are used today. Dr. Healy also promoted the career development of women in science and medicine.

For me, Bernadine's brilliance, wisdom, passion, loyalty, integrative thinking and willingness to help others stand out the most in my memory. In 1992, Dr. Healy appointed me as Chair of the NIH Health and Behavior Coordinating Committee and as a Special Assistant to help her with a reorganization of the National Institutes of Health to strengthen the Nation's research agenda through the integration of ADAMHA's three research institutes -- the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the National Institute of Mental Health -- into the NIH. The result: the NIH got its "head" back, and this marked the beginning of the "Decade of the Brain" that has resulted in an explosion of research advances in neurology, mental illness, and substance abuse disorders to the benefit of millions of patients in the United States and around the world. It also fostered greater understanding of the role of behavioral factors in the cause, treatment and prevention of all diseases permitting us to better capitalize on these perspectives in fighting major pandemics such as AIDS and obesity. This cross-cutting approach among institutes became a paradigm for many future NIH research initiatives. For many years, I worked with Dr. Healy to rectify the inequities in women's health care. And when in 1993, I was appointed the first Deputy Assistant Secretary for Women's Health to coordinate research, services, and prevention activities across the agencies of the US Department of Health and Human Services, including the NIH, CDC, and FDA, Dr. Healy told me how proud she was of this appointment and of the accomplishments of my office in advancing women's health. And her assessment was so very meaningful to me. Most recently, we worked together on a Commission of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress that produced a roadmap for future directions in health and medicine. Her critical contributions framed many of the recommendations of this report.

The Dr. Healy that I knew was a fearless trailblazer. It is no wonder that she graduated as valedictorian at the Hunter College High School in New York City and top of her class at Vassar College and Harvard Medical School. She completed her residency training in cardiology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and became the school's first full-time female faculty member. She also served as Assistant Dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and Director of the Hopkins Coronary Care Unit.

Bernadine's brilliant mind, Irish upbringing and outspoken nature made her a natural for politics and health policy. In 1984, she was appointed Deputy Director of the White House Office of Science and Policy. This early foray into health policy led to her appointment as Chair of the White House Cabinet Working Group on Biotechnology, Executive Secretary of the Science Council's Panel on the Health of Universities, and as a member of the

President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology. Her passion for policy and politics even led her to run for the Senate in Ohio in the 1994 primaries.

But her essence as a physician leader was the integration of medicine and public health motivated by her compassion and care for patients and her hopes to prevent disease in the first place. In 1995, Dr. Healy was appointed as the Dean of the School of Medicine at Ohio State University. There, she established a School of Public Health in recognition of the importance that the field of public health has to health in our nation and world; a heart and lung institute; a musculoskeletal institute; and expanded cancer and genomics research there. The medical school was also designated as a nationally recognized Center of Excellence in Women's Health, a program that I established in my role as the country's first Deputy Assistant Secretary for Women's Health. In 1998, Dr. Healy was appointed the President at the American Heart Association, and in 1999, she was named President and CEO of the American Red Cross. She provided leadership at this organization after 9/11 and believed, as Louis Pasteur once said, "that chance favors the prepared mind." That is why she allocated funds to prepare for future emergencies that did in fact occur --the anthrax attacks against our nation, Hurricane Katrina and other numerous hurricanes and disasters.

A brilliant communicator and a strong believer in translating scientific advances to increase public awareness of medical issues, Dr. Healy served as a health commentator for CBS News and PBS as well as an editor and columnist for *U.S. News and World Report*. She authored more than 220 scholarly papers and published two books, titled "A New Prescription for Women's Health" and "Living Time: Faith and Facts to Transform Your Cancer Journey" -- Dr. Healy's account of her own personal journey with brain cancer for more than a decade. She was an extraordinary fighter in this battle as well.

Today, at a time when more women are graduating from U.S. medical schools than men, it is sometimes easy to forget the barriers and prejudices that existed for female physicians, especially those who took risks to challenge the status quo. Dr. Healy was a pioneer, with a vision for improving the health of the nation and world. She was a change agent who blazed a path and developed innovative strategies and solutions to achieve this goal. She never let obstacles or criticism stop her from achieving her dreams. Dr. Healy always looked over the horizon to identify new frontiers to reach a world with a healthier future for women and men.

Medicine has lost a luminary, a health champion, a brilliant scientist and communicator, an innovative thinker, and a compassionate, dedicated healer. And those of us who benefited from her wisdom and guidance have lost a valued mentor and treasured friend. However, the landmark contributions of this legendary physician leader -- Dr. Bernadine Healy -- will have a lasting impact on improving health in America and around the world for generations to come.

Rear Admiral Susan Blumenthal, M.D. (ret.) is the Public Health Editor of the Huffington Post. She serves as Director of the Health and Medicine Program at the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress in Washington, D.C., a Clinical Professor at Georgetown and Tufts University Schools of Medicine, and Chair of the Global Health Program at the Meridian International Center. She served for more than 20 years in health leadership positions in the Federal government in the Administrations of four U.S. Presidents, including as Assistant Surgeon General of the United States, the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of Women's Health, as a White House Advisor on Health, and as Chief of the Behavioral Medicine and Basic Prevention Research Branch at the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Blumenthal has received numerous awards including honorary doctorates and has been decorated with the highest medals of the U.S. Public Health Service for her pioneering leadership and significant contributions to advancing health in the United States and worldwide and was the recipient of the 2009 Health Leader of the Year Award from the Commissioned Officers Association. Admiral Blumenthal has been named by the National Library of Medicine, The New York Times and the Medical Herald as one of the most influential women in medicine and as a Rock Star of Science by GQ by the Geoffrey Beene Foundation.

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