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Our Opinion: Prescription for health

Surgeon general nominee has what we need

When President Obama presented Dr. Regina Benjamin, a rural family physician with ties to Florida A&M University, as his choice for U.S. surgeon general, we couldn't help but to feel a little hometown pride. Early prognostications indicate that Dr. Benjamin, an Alabama native and former FAMU trustee appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush in 2001, will breeze through Senate confirmation hearings.

Cross your fingers and hope she paid her taxes dutifully.

Dr. Maggie Blackburn said Dr. Benjamin will be "really good at being a voice for all of the doctors who are out in the trenches." Dr. Blackburn, director of rural health at the Florida State University College of Medicine, worked with Dr. Benjamin through the American Association of Family Physicians in the early 1990s, when efforts were being made to reach out to female, minority and newly minted physicians.

Together, our ambitious president and his pick emerge as icons for Tallahassee's regional health-care organizations that aspire to being a center of excellence for public health — as both a service and an economic driver.

As Mr. Obama focuses on his October deadline to begin overhauling the U.S. health care system, he could hardly do better than turning to this inspiring physician with first-hand experience as a care provider and manager of treatment programs for underserved areas.

During a news conference, she spoke about her family's medical history, factors that led her to open her rural health clinic in Bayou La Batre, Ala., resurrecting it twice after the facility was destroyed first by Hurricane Katrina, and later, by fire.

"My father died of diabetes and hypertension. My older brother and only sibling died at age 44 of HIV-related illness. My mother died of lung cancer, because as a young girl, she wanted to smoke, just like her twin brother," she said.

In her efforts to provide primary care, Dr. Benjamin distinguished herself by being both a Good Samaritan — covering prescription costs for patients who could not afford them — and a "genius," receiving a \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation grant, bestowed upon "creative people ... committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world."

The American people need individuals with those characteristics as lawmakers, medical professionals and insurance and pharmaceutical companies attempt to hammer out a viable system of better access and care.

"I can be a voice in the movement to improve our nation's health care and our nation's health," Dr. Benjamin said Monday. "I want to be sure that no one falls through the cracks as we improve our health care system."

We congratulate Mr. Obama on his selection for the next voice of public-health awareness in America. A physician with gritty, real-world experience, public policy savvy and respect among her peers, Dr. Benjamin is an outstanding choice.