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CDC to have policy role with Obama, says acting chief

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The acting chief of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday that comments by President Obama have encouraged him to believe that science will play a major role in crafting policy on public health.

“It was very exciting to hear President Obama say that science will have a seat at the policy table,” said Dr. Richard Besser, who has been CDC’s acting director for a month. “The signals are there that science is respected and will be heard.”

Besser has replaced Dr. Julie Gerberding, whose six-year tenure was marked by criticism that she sacrificed science for politics and carried the Bush agenda on global warming and other issues into the world of scientific research.

Gerberding and her defenders countered that she was an independent leader dedicated to science.

Besser made his comments in an interview after addressing the Buckhead Business Association, where he discussed his years in public health.

Later, he said, “I understand fully that science isn’t the only component that goes into policy decisions. But just having a voice at the table — and being able to share what the science recommends — is a real big step, an important step for agency morale.”

Besser, who previously served as the CDC head of terrorism preparedness, made clear his belief that science is at the core of CDC’s mission, saying, “CDC is a science-driven agency and we pride ourselves on that.”

During Obama’s inauguration speech last month, the president said, “We will restore science to its rightful place.”

CDC is still learning the scientific priorities of the Obama administration, Besser said, but he added, “We recognize as a public health agency the importance of climate change and really welcome the opportunity to share

... what the potential impacts are on public health.”

The appointment of a permanent CDC director was delayed when former U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle recently withdrew from consideration for the post of U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services. The secretary appoints the CDC chief.

— Staff researcher Nisa Asokan contributed to this report.

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