Bernadine P. Healy, a Pioneer at National Institutes of Health, Dies at 67

Dr. Bernadine P. Healy was the first woman to lead her agency.Credit...Andrea Mohin

By Robert D. McFadden Aug. 8, 2011

Dr. Bernadine P. Healy , the first woman to lead the National Institutes of Health and the first physician to lead the American Red Cross until she was forced out in a storm of criticism over flawed responses to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, died on Saturday at her home in Gates Mills, Ohio. She was 67.

The cause was recurring brain cancer, which she had battled for 13 years, her husband, Dr. Floyd D. Loop, said.

In a hybrid career in the largely male domains of medicine and government, Dr. Healy — a cardiologist and feminist — was a professor at Johns Hopkins University, dean of the Ohio State University medical school, a White House science adviser and president of the American Heart Association. She wrote scientific papers and magazine columns, and once ran for the United States Senate.

But she was best known as a tough, innovative administrator who, as director of the National Institutes of Health from 1991 to 1993, championed studies that overturned false assumptions about women's health. And as president of the American Red Cross from 1999 to 2001, she struggled to coordinate its complex, often contradictory missions of humanitarian disaster relief and the

Dr. Healy's résumé was a compendium of academic and professional achievements that in its cold detail omitted a central fact: her relentless attack on the misperception that heart attacks were men's problems. Heart disease was by far the leading killer of American women, who accounted for nearly 40 percent of its victims. Women's groups had long sought a greater focus on women's coronary health, cancers and the role of hormonal changes and therapy.

Dr. Healy, who had pushed similar concerns within cardiology, went to Washington and made the issue her own.

"The problem is to convince both the lay and medical sectors that coronary heart disease is also a women's disease, not a man's disease in disguise," Dr. Healy wrote in The New England Journal of Medicine in 1991. At the institutes of health, the country's largest medical research organization, Dr. Healy, a Republican appointed by President George Bush, inherited a sprawling agency of 15,000 people. It had gone without a director for two years and was beset by bureaucratic infighting, political interference and declining morale.

“I am willing to go out on a limb, shake the tree and even take a few bruises,” she told reporters. “I’m not particularly concerned about being popular.”

Dr. Healy cracked the whip on bureaucrats, recruited new talent, expanded the Human Genome Project and reversed policies that, like the medical establishment, had focused largely on men’s health and virtually excluded women from clinical trials. She mandated the inclusion of women in trials wherever appropriate.

She began the Women’s Health Initiative, a $625 million study of the causes, prevention and treatment of cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis and cancer in middle-aged and older women. Long after her tenure, the initiative continued yielding important findings. In 2002, it found that prolonged estrogen-progestin hormone replacement therapy in postmenopausal women increased risks of breast cancer, stroke and heart attacks.

“Dr. Healy’s stubborn insistence that the N.I.H. concern itself with women’s health was not broadly supported at the time,” Anne M. Dranginis, an associate professor of biological sciences at St. John’s University, wrote in a 2002 Op-Ed article in The New York Times. “Had Dr. Healy not championed research on women’s health, how much longer would healthy women have been encouraged to take hormone drugs?”

Dr. Healy stepped down when President Bill Clinton named a new N.I.H. director in 1993.

Six years later, Dr. Healy faced even more daunting challenges at the Red Cross. While it was widely seen as an icon of humanitarian work, the organization was an unwieldy behemoth with 1,000 chapters, 1.2 million volunteers, 3,000 staff members and a $3 billion budget. It was also a house divided, with nonprofit disaster-relief on one side and, on the other, a blood business run like a corporation.

Recovering from a brain tumor as she took over, Dr. Healy found what she called “turf battles, gossip and very little teamwork.”

Her reform efforts stumbled in the face of resistant autonomous chapters, a staff that chafed under her hard-driving style, cases of embezzlement and lax controls, which led to record fines for infected blood products. She made the safety of blood supplies a priority.

But she upset many by auditing local chapters’ finances, overriding veteran administrators’ decisions and strongly supporting Israel’s Red Shield of David in its effort to join the international Red Cross and Red Crescent societies without having to accept a cross or crescent as its emblem. When the effort failed, she withheld dues from the international body in protest.

Missteps after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks precipitated her downfall. Red Cross disaster-relief units responded poorly, especially at the Pentagon crash site, critics said. Later, her handling of blood donations for 9/11 victims came under fire. Collections far exceeded amounts needed. Some blood was kept for other users, but much of it expired and had to be discarded.

She was excoriated in Congress and by chapter leaders and donors over her Liberty Fund, established to aid victims of the terrorist attacks. It collected $564 million but kept $264 million for other uses, including aid in future attacks. She said it had never been intended just for Sept. 11 victims, but her critics insisted that the money had been raised under false pretenses. In response to the protests, the Red Cross redirected all the money to Sept. 11 relief.

Critics called Dr. Healy autocratic and said she had jeopardized the good will of a revered charity. Allies defended her as smartly decisive, even if she sometimes ignored political realities. She resigned under pressure, although one Red Cross director acknowledged, “We hired a change agent for a culture resistant to change.”

Bernadine Patricia Healy was born in New York City on Aug. 2, 1944, one of four daughters of Michael and Violet McGrath Healy. Her parents ran a small perfume factory in Long Island City, Queens, where she grew up.

She graduated from Hunter High School in Manhattan in 1962, got through Vassar College in three years and graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1970. After postdoctoral work, she became a full professor at Johns Hopkins in 1982 and directed its cardiac care unit from 1976 to 1984.

Her first marriage, to Dr. George Bulkley, a surgeon she had met in medical school, ended in divorce in 1981. They had a daughter, Bartlett Bulkley. In

1985, Dr. Healy married Dr. Loop, a cardiac surgeon. They had a daughter, Marie McGrath Loop. Dr. Loop and her two daughters survive her.

Dr. Healy was President Ronald Reagan's deputy science adviser in 1984 and 1985, president of the American Heart Association in 1988 and 1989, and from 1985 to 1991 practiced cardiology and directed research at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, which was operated by Dr. Loop.

She lost a Senate primary in Ohio in 1994, was a professor and dean at Ohio State from 1995 to 1999 and an adviser on bioterrorism to President George W. Bush.