WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL

Francis Collins Relies on Science and Faith

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the head of the National Institutes of Health finds hope in his evangelical beliefs and the altruism of medical researchers

By Emily Bobrow
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It takes no time for Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, to recall the moment when he knew he wanted to be a scientist. "Tenth-grade chemistry class," he says over the phone from his home office in Chevy Chase, Md., where he has been working since most of the NIH campus in Bethesda, Md., shut down in March. Much of the science he had learned before then was "descriptive" and uninteresting, he explains—but for this class, students used experiments to figure things out. "It became clear to me that science is like a detective story," says Dr. Collins, 70. "If you're good at it, you'll discover something that no one ever knew before. What's not to love about that? I was hooked."

The stakes for Dr. Collins's detective work have never felt higher. As the head of a $42 billion biomedical research agency, he is working 15-hour days to help fight the raging Covid-19 pandemic. Coordinating public and private players to create faster tests, new treatments and a vaccine demands lots of Zoom calls, he says. "Getting different pharmaceutical companies at the same table as government officials is something I've done before, but it usually takes around two years to put together. In this case, it took two weeks," he says with a chuckle. The speed may be paying off. In Senate testimony in early July, Dr. Collins expressed optimism that there will be a vaccine "that works and is safe" by the end of the year.

But it is one thing to generate a proven vaccine in record time, another to produce enough doses and another still to get people to take it. Dr. Collins is alarmed that in a May poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, only around half of all Americans said that they would inoculate themselves against Covid-19. "We could potentially save hundreds of thousands of lives," Dr. Collins says. "And yet so many Americans have been affected, or infected, by outrageous, outlandish conspiracy theories that have no foundation at all." He notes that the antivaccination movement, which has gained steam in recent years, is already responsible for the return of once-eradicated childhood diseases, such as a spike in measles cases last year. "This deep distrust does not serve us well as a nation that wants to have a bright future," he says.

To help inspire public confidence, Dr. Collins says that he and Anthony Fauci, the director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, are working to broaden coronavirus vaccine trials to include people of different races, ages and risk profiles. "If we say it's safe, we need to make sure it's safe and effective for everyone," Dr. Collins says.

Such outreach is particularly vital since the pandemic has exposed deep health disparities in the U.S., further eroding public trust in the medical establishment. Black Americans, for example, are dying of Covid-19 at 2.5 times the rate of white ones, according to the Atlantic's Covid Tracking Project. "These are differences that have nothing to do with the biology of individuals but with health inequities that were already there," Dr. Collins says. The NIH is now working to get more virus testing in high-risk neighborhoods, and he is involved in "serious discussions with senior leadership" at the NIH to figure out how best to address the medical legacy of centuries of racism. "You can't survey these circumstances without feeling a call to action," he observes.