

Honoring National Hispanic Heritage Month

Insights

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On behalf of National Hispanic Heritage Month, we recognize [Dr. Antonia Novello](#), the first woman and the first Hispanic person to become Surgeon General of the United States.

As a child growing up in Puerto Rico, Dr. Novello suffered from a debilitating abnormality of the large intestine called congenital megacolon. Her family could not afford corrective surgery until she was 18, and the condition limited her activities. Her early health struggles, along with the death of an aunt due to kidney failure, influenced her to become a doctor specializing in nephrology. As a Congressional Fellow with the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Dr. Novello helped draft the 1984 Organ Transplantation Procurement Act, which founded the national registry for organ matching.

In 1970, Dr. Novello completed her medical training at the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine in San Juan. She completed a pediatric internship at the University of Michigan Medical School in 1974 and a nephrology fellowship at Georgetown University School of Medicine Hospital in 1976. Dr. Novello went on to obtain a master's in public health in 1982 and a doctorate in public health in 2000, both from Johns Hopkins University.

Following a short time in private practice, Dr. Novello joined the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps in 1978 and worked for the National Institute of Arthritis, Metabolism and Digestive Disorders at the National Institutes of Health. In 1987, she moved to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, where she focused on pediatric AIDS. For this work, she gained acclaim and was appointed Surgeon General in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush.

During her time as Surgeon General, Dr. Novello centered attention on the health of women, children, and people of color. Of note, she launched initiatives to end tobacco advertising aimed at children, including the use of the "Joe Camel" cartoon. She was also one of the first health authorities to highlight the urgent need for attention to women and children with AIDS, particularly to prevent the neonatal transmission of HIV. Dr. Novello also promoted early childhood health initiatives such as injury prevention and immunization, and sought to raise awareness of domestic violence in the U.S.

Following her service, Dr. Novello held positions as special representative to the United Nations Children's Fund and New York State Health Commissioner. Even in her retirement, she has continued her public health calling by serving Puerto Rico. She took part in a relief mission to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017 and [administered COVID-19 vaccines in San Juan in 2021](#).

For her public health endeavors, Dr. Novello has been awarded the Surgeon General's Exemplary Service Medal in 1989; the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Medal in 1991; the Public Health Service Distinguished Service Medal in 1992; the Order of Military Medical Merit Award in 1992; the James Smithson Bicentennial Medal in 2002; and the U.S. Armed Forces Humanitarian Service Medal in 2018. She was also elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2000, and inducted into the [National Women's Hall of Fame in 1994](#).

In honor of National Hispanic Heritage Month, we recognize Dr. Antonia Novello for her boundary-breaking professional accomplishments as the first Hispanic Surgeon General and the first woman Surgeon General, as well as for her contributions to the public health of Hispanic communities, survivors of natural disasters, and women and children.