The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced on Thursday (Oct. 23) that Dr. Karen DeSalvo, a former Tulane University School of Medicine faculty member and alumna of both the School of Medicine and the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, would assume the role of acting assistant secretary for health effective immediately.

In her new position, DeSalvo will assist Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell with the department’s response to the Ebola epidemic.

In a statement emailed to reporters, the HHS head lauded DeSalvo as “a nationally recognized leader in public health,” and looked for her to “bring her knowledge and real-world experience to bear on some of the most important issues confronting our department, especially our Ebola response efforts.”

DeSalvo will step down from her current post as head of the U.S. government's Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, a move that she told staff would allow her to refocus on public health issues.

“I have deep roots and a belief in public health and its critical value in assuring the health of everyone, not only in crisis, but every day, and I am honored to be asked to step in to serve,” Desalvo said in an email to her staff.

Before she took the job as the head of the ONC in 2013, DeSalvo served as health commissioner for the city of New Orleans and prior to that she was a professor and vice dean of health policy at the Tulane School of Medicine.

DeSalvo spearheaded the university's medical response following Hurricane Katrina and pushed for the opening of community health clinics as New Orleans rebuilt.