

EXCLUSIVE: Milwaukee Health Commissioner Takes Leave Of Absence In Middle Of Covid Actions For Elective Surgery

By Mark Belling, WISN-AM

Milwaukee Public Health Commissioner Jeannette Kowalik scheduled elective surgery in the middle of the Covid outbreak during which time the city lockdown order, issued in her name, was put into effect.

Kowalik's chief of staff, Lillian Paine, tells me Kowalik scheduled surgery for pain related to an "autoimmune disease" that was postponed because of the Covid outbreak. Payne says Kowalik took the opportunity to do the surgery when hospitals resumed elective procedures last week.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett's office has not responded to my inquiries about whether Barrett approved the leave. Kowalik is appointed by both the mayor and the common council. Council President Cavalier Johnson is also ducking my questions. The Stay At Home order issued in Kowalik's name March 23 was put into effect Wednesday night after the state Supreme Court struck down the statewide order from the Evers administration.

A follow-up order is due today and is apparently being issued by Kowalik's deputy, although it is presumed Barrett is making the actual decisions.

Kowalik scheduled the surgery during the period in which it was presumed the Supreme Court ruling would come down, forcing the city to decide if it would issue its own order. Paine, the Kowalik aide, says the commissioner has frequently discussed her medical condition.

Thousands of Wisconsinites have had medical procedures delayed during Covid because of the refusal of hospitals to schedule them until recently. Paine is not disclosing the specific surgery Kowalik underwent. She says Kowalik's team is capable of managing the Covid orders in her absence.

The Milwaukee Health department has been a disaster in recent years. Kowalik is the third person in the position in three years and the longtime former head of the agency was dumped after it was learned the Health Department has essentially done nothing for years about the lead poisoning problem despite receiving large city funding and federal grants. Kowalik, who was unanimously confirmed by the common council has a PhD but is not a medical doctor.

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May 15