

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

September 14, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

Throughout the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we have repeatedly expressed our grave concerns that the Trump Administration is putting politics above science in its response.¹ These actions have sidelined the nation's public health institutions, eroded public trust and confidence in their guidance, and threatened the health and well-being of all Americans. In July, we called on you to rectify these failures and either stand up to protect public health or step aside as the country's top health official.² New reports of egregious attacks on science by political appointees at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) make it clear, however, that politics continues to override public health within the agency you lead.³

According to recent reports, HHS political appointees have demanded to review and sought to change the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports (MMWR), known as "the voice of CDC."⁴ For 60 years, CDC has prepared this scientific publication series to provide "timely, reliable, authoritative, accurate,

¹ See, e.g., Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, to Secretary Alex Azar, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (June 29, 2020).

² Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Rep. Diana DeGette, Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, to Secretary Alex Azar, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (July 20, 2020).

³ *Trump officials interfered with CDC reports on COVID-19*, Politico (Sept. 11, 2020).

⁴ *Id.*; *Trump officials seek greater control over CDC reports on coronavirus*, Washington Post (Sept. 12, 2020); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About MMWR* (accessed Sept. 12, 2020) (www.cdc.gov/mmwr/about.html).

objective, and useful public health information and recommendations.”⁵ CDC has published nearly 100 MMWR COVID-19 publications—updating health practitioners and the public on such topics as the transmission and risks among children, communities of color, and essential workers.⁶

According to troubling reports, HHS political appointees have sought to make politically based changes to the MMWRs to align with President Trump’s false and misleading statements about COVID-19.⁷ For instance, HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Michael Caputo—a former Trump campaign official with no medical or scientific background—reportedly attempted to add caveats to CDC’s findings, change reports retroactively, and even tried to delay the release of certain MMWRs, including one that addressed how doctors were prescribing hydroxychloroquine, the drug promoted by President Trump as a COVID-19 treatment despite the lack of scientific evidence and peer-reviewed literature.⁸ Additionally, in an August email to CDC Director Robert Redfield and other Administration officials, a fellow political appointee and aide to Mr. Caputo, Dr. Paul Alexander, reportedly berated CDC scientists for purportedly attempting to “hurt the President” and allegedly called on Director Redfield to retroactively modify two MMWRs, claiming they “undermined Trump’s push to reopen schools.”⁹

Although reporting indicates that CDC officials have fought back against the “most sweeping changes” to the MMWRs, staff within the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA) have been able to force wording compromises and appear to be gaining increasing power over these public health reports.¹⁰ In defending HHS’s review of the reports, Mr. Caputo promoted a false and dangerous conspiracy theory that there are “ulterior deep state motives in the bowels of CDC.”¹¹ This echoes a baseless claim that President Trump leveled against the U.S Food and Drug Administration.¹²

In both of these instances of purely political attacks, you have refused to defend the agencies under your charge to lead. In short, rather than dispensing evidence-based public health

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About MMWR* (accessed Sept. 12, 2020) (www.cdc.gov/mmwr/about.html); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *A History of MMWR* (Oct. 7, 2011) (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 60(04);7-14).

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Novel Coronavirus Reports* (accessed Sept. 12, 2020) (www.cdc.gov/mmwr/Novel_Coronavirus_Reports.html).

⁷ *Trump officials seek greater control over CDC reports on coronavirus*, Washington Post (Sept. 12, 2020).

⁸ *Trump officials interfered with CDC reports on COVID-19*, Politico (Sept. 11, 2020).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Trump says without proof that FDA ‘deep state’ slowing COVID trials*, Reuters (Aug. 22, 2020).

information to educate the public during the pandemic, ASPA increasingly appears to be a continuation of the political arm of the White House.

We are concerned that this unprecedented attempt to undermine our nation's public health is either happening with your approval or rogue political appointees are taking actions behind your back. Either way, these actions are doing grave harm to the very public health agencies you lead and threatening the health of the nation. Congress and the American people deserve to know if you approved these egregious actions by these political appointees, and if it was done without your knowledge, what actions you will take to ensure that it never happens again. It is long past time that you stand up for public health.

The pervasive political interference by HHS appointees is not limited to CDC, however. Earlier last week, for example, a separate report detailed Dr. Alexander's attempts to control the public statements made by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert.¹³ Among other intrusive tactics, Dr. Alexander reportedly instructed staff at the National Institutes of Health about what Dr. Fauci should say during interviews, promoting statements and positions expressed by President Trump that are contrary to scientific evidence.¹⁴

The American people have suffered the consequences of the destructive political attacks on HHS's public health agencies and experts. We have called on you to uphold your solemn oath of office to protect the nation's health or step aside. Time and time again, you have failed to defend your own public health institutions and officials, and have allowed the Administration to promote politics over science during our nation's pandemic response. Now, we demand a briefing from you by September 18, 2020, as to how you intend to fulfill your oath. During the briefing, we expect you to address the following questions:

1. Were you aware of any actions taken by political officials within HHS's ASPA to review, alter, or otherwise undermine the scientific integrity of CDC's MMWR process and publications, and did you authorize these actions, as reported? Do you condone the disparaging comments, reportedly made by ASPA staff, regarding the federal agencies and career staff you lead?
2. Will you commit to restoring the scientific integrity and autonomy of the nation's public health agencies and experts so that they may operate free from political interference? What specific actions will you take to assure your staff that science, and not politics, will guide HHS's public health publications, decisions, policies, and actions? Further, what steps will you take to prohibit the involvement of political appointees in matters that have been and must be driven by science?
3. Will you commit to ensuring that science, and not political considerations, inform HHS's contributions to the Trump Administration's COVID-19 pandemic response moving

¹³ *Emails show HHS official trying to muzzle Fauci*, Politico (Sept. 9, 2020).

¹⁴ *Id.*

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4. What steps will you take to convince the American people that you are working to serve in the best interest of their health and well-being and not merely at the political whims of the President?

Thank you for your prompt attention to our urgent request. For any questions or to schedule the briefing, please contact Kevin Barstow of the Committee staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,


Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman


Diana DeGette
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations