

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

April 23, 2020

Christi A. Grimm  
Principal Deputy Inspector General  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Ms. Grimm:

I write to you about concerning reports that one of our government's top public health officials was recently moved out of his central role responding to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, allegedly for political reasons. I have been particularly concerned by the Trump Administration's politicization of public health agencies. This most recent action, if true, further raises serious questions about the commitment of President Trump and his Administration to science and the public good as the government and the nation work to combat an unprecedented global health pandemic.

This week, Dr. Rick Bright was reportedly dismissed as the Director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) and as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR), and reassigned to a "narrower" position at the National Institutes of Health.<sup>1</sup> A career civil servant, Dr. Bright has served at BARDA for 10 years, including as the Director since 2016, and has worked closely and constructively with the Committee for many years.

As the federal agency tasked with assisting medical countermeasure development and commercialization, including pursuing public-private partnerships to help the country prepare and respond to public health pandemics, BARDA is playing a central role in the country's fight against COVID-19 by supporting the development of safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics. Removing Dr. Bright in the midst of a pandemic would raise serious concerns under any circumstances, but his allegations that political considerations influenced this decision heighten those concerns and demand full accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> *A doctor says he was removed from his federal post after pressing for rigorous vetting of treatments embraced by Trump*, New York Times (Apr. 22, 2020).

In recent weeks, President Trump has repeatedly promoted the use of two antimalarial drugs (chloroquine phosphate and hydroxychloroquine sulfate) for the treatment of COVID-19, despite the absence of clinical trial data demonstrating the drugs' safety and efficacy in treating the disease, and against the warnings of his own public health experts.<sup>2</sup> Just this week, an expert panel at the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases found that there is "insufficient clinical data to recommend either for or against using chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine for the treatment of COVID-19," highlighting the need for clinical trials and additional data demonstrating safety and efficacy for treating COVID-19 before these drugs are widely provided to COVID-19 patients.<sup>3</sup> In a "strong recommendation," the panel also explicitly recommended against using the combination of hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic azithromycin for treating COVID-19 patients—a drug combination repeatedly pushed by President Trump<sup>4</sup>—due to "the potential for toxicities."<sup>5</sup>

In a statement, Dr. Bright alleged that he was reassigned because he refused to bend to political pressure and use taxpayer resources to fund these unproven drugs that President Trump was publicly pushing for treating COVID-19. Dr. Bright asserted, "I believe this transfer was in response to my insistence that the government invest the billions of dollars allocated by Congress to address the Covid-19 pandemic into safe and scientifically vetted solutions, and not in drugs, vaccines and other technologies that lack scientific merit. [...] I am speaking out because to combat this deadly virus, science — not politics or cronyism — has to lead the way."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Bright further explained that he "resisted efforts to fund potentially dangerous drugs promoted by those with political connections," specifically chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, drugs which he determined are "unproven" and "lack scientific merit" and should not be provided "on demand to the American public."<sup>7</sup> Another report says Dr. Bright was "frozen out of his email and learned about the reassignment only when his name was removed from the BARDA website this weekend."<sup>8</sup> If Dr. Bright's assertions about why he was removed are true, this is a serious matter that warrants prompt attention.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ignoring Expert Opinion, Trump Again Promotes Use of Hydroxychloroquine*, New York Times (Apr. 5, 2020); *Exclusive: Pressed by Trump, U.S. pushed unproven coronavirus treatment guidance*, Reuters (Apr. 4, 2020); *Remarks by President Trump*, White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing (Mar. 19, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> National Institutes of Health, National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, *COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines* (Apr. 21, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *New U.S. Treatment Guidelines for Covid-19 Don't See Much Progress*, New York Times (Apr. 22, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See note 3.

<sup>6</sup> See note 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *HHS ousts vaccine expert as Covid-19 threat grows*, Politico (Apr. 22, 2020).

Now, more than ever — in the midst of a global health pandemic, and with an Administration stacked with political leaders who repeatedly pander to a President intent on burying science and dismantling agencies' longstanding missions for the public good — we must ensure our government's scientific institutions are insulated from political pressure. As Dr. Bright stated, "Rushing blindly towards unproven drugs can be disastrous and result in countless more deaths. Science, in service to the health and safety of the American people, must always trump politics."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Bright will reportedly be requesting that your office "investigate the manner in which this administration has politicized the work of BARDA and has pressured me and other conscientious scientists to fund companies with political connections and efforts that lack scientific merit."<sup>10</sup> In addition to accepting his request, I urge you to investigate the circumstances surrounding Dr. Bright's reassignment, including the following questions.

1. Were all relevant federal laws and regulations followed in Dr. Bright's reassignment, and did any prohibited personnel practices occur;
2. Who made the decision to reassign Dr. Bright, and when was the decision made, including when was Dr. Bright notified of such decision;
3. What reasons were given to justify Dr. Bright's reassignment; and
4. Did political considerations affect the decision to reassign Dr. Bright, including Dr. Bright's actions and statements related to chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Kevin McAloon and Kevin Barstow of the Majority staff at (202) 225-2927.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman

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<sup>9</sup> See note 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*