

Congressional Subcommittee Testimony

Opening Statement

Michael L. Bowen

Good morning. My name is Michael Bowen and I am the Executive Vice President of Prestige Ameritech of North Richland Hills, Texas. I have been in the medical device industry since 1986, and with Prestige Ameritech since 2006. Prestige Ameritech was founded by president and CEO, Dan Reese in 2005.

I am going to give a brief overview of my interactions with BARDA and its directors, but first I'll give some pertinent mask industry history. Until 2004, 90% of all surgical masks *worn* in the US were domestically made. That year, all of the major domestic mask sellers switched from selling domestically made masks to selling imported masks.

Prestige Ameritech recognized this as a national security risk in 2006. We thought that once America's hospitals learned that their mask supplies were subject to diversion by foreign governments during pandemics, they would switch back to US-made masks. We were wrong.

In November of 2007, we received a phone call from BARDA asking for a tour of our mask factory. BARDA was acting on George W. Bush's Presidential Directive 21, the purpose of which was to review America's disaster plans. Brenda Hayden with BARDA gave a presentation which showed that BARDA was concerned about the foreign-controlled mask supply. We were thrilled that BARDA had discovered the issue - until Brenda said that BARDA was only charged with *studying* the problem.

We were disappointed, but took consolation in the fact that finally a federal agency knew that the mask supply was in danger. We were happy to have an ally.

Two years later, in 2009, I received a call from Brenda Hayden. She started the conversation by saying, "We have a situation." Her serious tone caused me to ask her if she was talking about a pandemic, and she said yes. She asked if we could ramp up production, and I said yes.

We built more mask machines, bought an abandoned Kimberly Clark mask factory and tripled our workforce. America's hospitals needed us and we rose to the occasion. We told them about the high cost of ramping up. They said that they would stay with us. Unfortunately, most returned to buying cheaper foreign-made masks when they became available. The company survived by laying off 150 people, taking pay cuts, and taking on more investors.

The H1N1 pandemic wasn't severe enough to cause foreign health officials to cut off mask shipments to America, so our predictions didn't come true - yet. In a weakened state, but undaunted, Prestige Ameritech continued saying that the US mask supply was headed for failure. We just didn't know when.

In 2014, to give my security story more credibility, I formed the Secure Mask Supply Association. Paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin, I told three competing domestic mask makers that if we didn't hang together we would hang separately. China was poised to put us all out of business and put the country at even greater risk. Crosstex, Gerson, and Medicom agreed with me and joined the SMSA. Unfortunately, the Secure Mask Supply Association's warnings also went unheeded.

During my quest to secure the mask supply, I had the privilege of working with three BARDA directors: Dr. Robin Robinson, Dr. Richard Hatchett and Dr. Rick Bright. They were helpful and encouraged me to continue warning people about the mask supply. All three men agreed to back up my story. They said that they would express their concerns about the mask supply to anyone that I could get to call them – anyone except reporters. They weren't allowed to talk to reporters. They also weren't allowed to endorse the Secure Mask Supply Association. Dr. Robinson was going to until HHS attorneys told him that it could cost him his job.

I can confirm that the emails in Dr. Bright's complaint are mine. They are merely the latest of 13 years of emails I sent to BARDA in my effort to get HHS to understand that the US mask supply was destined for failure. Robinson, Hatchett and Bright all wanted to remedy the problem, but in my opinion didn't have enough authority. America was told that governmental "silos" had been torn down after "911" so that different federal agencies could work together for national security, but I didn't see evidence of that. The DOD, VA, CDC and HHS could have worked together to secure America's mask supply. I had suggested this on many occasions to BARDA and to the CDC.

I will be happy to answer any questions that you have about Prestige Ameritech, the US mask supply, or my interactions with BARDA, the CDC or Rick Bright.

Thank you.