

	<p>Written Testimony House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Health</p>
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<p>Scientific Integrity in the COVID-19 Response</p>

<p><i>Statement of</i> Rick Bright, Ph.D</p>

For Release on Delivery
Expected at
10:00 am
May 14, 2020

Good morning Chairwoman, Eshoo, Ranking Member Burgess and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I am Dr. Rick Bright, a career public servant and a scientist who has spent 25 years of my career focused on addressing pandemic outbreaks. I received my bachelor's degree with honors in both biology and physical sciences from Auburn University at Montgomery in Alabama. I earned my PhD in Immunology and Molecular Pathogenesis from Emory University in Georgia. My dissertation was focused on pandemic avian influenza. I have spent my entire career leading teams of scientists in drugs, diagnostics and vaccine development -- in the government with CDC and BARDA, for a global non-profit organization and also in the biotechnology industry. Regardless of my position, my job and my entire professional focus has been on saving lives. My professional background has prepared me for a moment like this -- to confront and defeat a deadly virus like COVID-19 that threatens Americans and people around the globe.

I joined the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) in 2010 and from November of 2016 until April 21 of this year, I had the privilege of serving our country as its Director. During the time I was Director of BARDA we successfully partnered with private industry to achieve an unprecedented number of FDA approvals for medical countermeasures against a wide variety of national health security threats. This was a major and unprecedented accomplishment and one that I and the conscientious employees of BARDA take great pride in.

On April 21, 2020, I was removed from my positions as the Director of BARDA and HHS Deputy Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response by HHS leadership and involuntarily transferred to a more limited and less impactful position at the National Institutes of Health. I believe this transfer was in response to my insistence that the government invest funding allocated to BARDA 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. While my intention in testifying today is to be forward looking, I spoke out then and I am testifying today because science -- not politics or cronyism -- must lead the way to combat this deadly virus.

The world is confronting a great public health emergency which has the potential to eclipse the devastation wrought by the 1918 influenza which globally claimed over 50 million lives. We face a highly-transmissible and deadly virus which not only claims lives but is also disrupting the very foundations of our societies. The American health-care system is being taxed to the limit, our economy is spiraling downward -- leading to mass unemployment -- and our population is being paralyzed by fear stemming from the lack of a coordinated response and a dearth of accurate, clear communication about the path forward. Americans yearn to get back to work, to open their businesses and provide for their families. I get that. We need a national coordinated strategy to look at all of these pieces and to ensure that they fit well together. To conceive and implement this strategy, our government must draw on the guidance of the best scientific minds.

In my position as BARDA Director, I led portions of a coordinated response; development of vaccines, drugs and diagnostics. In January of this year, I pushed for our government to obtain virus samples from China and to secure more funding for BARDA to be able to get started quickly on the development of critical medical countermeasures. HHS leadership was dismissive about

my dire predictions about what I assumed would be a broader outbreak and the pressing need to act, and were therefore unwilling to act with the urgency that the situation required. Understanding that the United States had a critical shortage of necessary supplies and PPE to deal with a pandemic, in January, February and March, 2020, I pushed HHS to ramp up US production of masks, respirators and other critical supplies, such as medicine, syringes and swabs. Again, my urgency was dismissed and I was cut out of key high-level meetings to combat COVID-19. When I was nevertheless able to convey these urgent concerns by speaking directly with a senior White House advisor and with members of Congress who better understood the urgency to act, I faced hostility and marginalization from HHS officials. And finally, when I resisted efforts to promote and enable broad access to an unproven drug, chloroquine, to the American people without transparent information on the potential health risks, I was removed from BARDA.

While I am unfortunately no longer leading BARDA, I am an expert in these areas and fully understand the grave risks we are facing. I continue to believe that we must act urgently to effectively combat this deadly disease. Our window of opportunity is closing. If we fail to develop a national coordinated response, based in science, I fear the pandemic will get far worse and be prolonged, causing unprecedented illness and fatalities. While it is terrifying to acknowledge the extent of the challenge that we currently confront, the undeniable fact is there will be a resurgence of the COVID19 this fall, greatly compounding the challenges of seasonal influenza and putting an unprecedented strain on our health care system. Without clear planning and implementation of the steps that I and other experts have outlined, 2020 will be darkest winter in modern history.

First and foremost, we need to be truthful with the American people. They want the truth. They can handle the truth. Truth, no matter how unpleasant, decreases the fear generated by uncertainty. The truth must be based on scientific evidence – and not filtered for political reasons. We must know and appreciate what we are up against. We have the world’s greatest scientists – they must be permitted to lead. Let them speak truthfully without fear of retribution. We must listen so that the government can then take the most powerful steps to save lives.

Most Americans want the same thing – a return to *normal*. The normal of 2019 is not going to return, but we all have an opportunity to shape the new normal of 2020 and beyond. With the participation and cooperation of every American, this can be achieved. We have a long history of uniting in response to adversity. Each of us can and must do our part now. However, it is critical to get this right. As my colleague Dr. Anthony Fauci testified on June 12, 2020, we must not rush blindly, or act too quickly, in returning to our daily lives. If we ignore the science, we stand a dramatically increased risk of worsening the spread of the virus in the coming months. This could lead to more widespread outbreaks and to many more lives lost throughout the remainder of this year.

To do our part, we need to hear one message in a voice that is clear, consistent, trustworthy, and backed by the best science available. In previous outbreaks, Americans listened to our public health experts at the CDC. They were the daily face and the voice guiding Americans during prior outbreaks including Ebola, Zika, and the H1N1 influenza pandemic. As an example, in 2009, the CDC, along with Elmo, taught Americans how to sneeze in a way that minimizes risk of contagion. Today, we need clear and simple messages to teach us how wear a face cover, when and how to safely go outside or back to work or back to school. It’s that simple.

While waiting for a cure (which, I believe, will come), there is much we MUST do. With clear leadership, honest communication, and data-driven solutions. We must:

- Increase public education regarding the basics -- handwashing, social distancing, appropriate face covering, self- and dependent monitoring, and frankly, our leaders must lead by modeling the behavior.
 - These simple measures reduce the number of people exposed and can buy us valuable time.
- Ramp up production of essential equipment and supplies, including raw materials and critical components.
 - Shortages of critical supplies and protective gear increase the risk to our frontline healthcare workers; they deserve the necessary equipment to protect themselves while treating their patients. First responders must also be given protective equipment. And we now see a courageous segment of our workforce – essential workers who keep food on our tables and keep our society running. They too deserve our appreciation and support.
- Facilitate equitable distribution of essential equipment and supplies – eliminate the state vs. state competition. Establishing a national standard of procurement and distribution increases efficiency and reduces costs.
- Finally, we need a national testing strategy. The virus is out there, it's everywhere. We need to be able to find it, to isolate it and to stop it from infecting more people. We need tests that are accurate, rapid, easy to use, low cost, and available to everyone who needs them. We need to be able to trust the results so that we can trace contacts, isolate and quarantine appropriately while striving to develop a cure.

As I reflect on the past few months of this outbreak, it is painfully clear that we were not as prepared as we should have been. We missed early warning signals and we forgot important pages from our pandemic playbook. There will be plenty of time to identify gaps for improvement. For now, we need to focus on getting things right going forward. We need to ensure that we have a plan to recovery and that everyone knows the plan and everyone participates in the plan. Congress has taken important steps to support the response; and we have more to do. We need your help to get us through the crisis.

We Americans, working cooperatively with our global friends, can and will succeed in finding a cure for COVID19, but that success depends on what we do today. We must unite and use all available tools and measures we have to stem the damage this virus has wrought.

We will either be remembered for what we did or for what we failed to do to address this crisis. I call on all of us to act – to ensure the health, safety, and prosperity of all Americans. You can count on me to continue to do my part.

