

Whistleblower complaint details Trump administration's corruption and obstruction of anti-pandemic efforts

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On Tuesday, Dr. Rick Bright, the ousted director of the government agency overseeing the development of a coronavirus vaccine, filed an 89-page whistleblower complaint that provides further details on the Trump administration's cover-up of the dangers from the virus and opposition to any coordinated effort to prevent its spread. It also catalogues corruption and insider dealing in awarding government contracts to drug firms and other companies, including those with ties to the Trump family.

Bright, who headed the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) since 2016, was removed from his post on April 20 after he leaked information concerning his opposition to the promotion of hydroxychloroquine by the White House and top officials in the Department of Health and Human Services to a Reuters reporter, who published an article on the internal administration conflict on April 16.

His formal complaint was filed with the Office of Special Counsel, which is tasked with shielding whistleblowers from retaliation by government officials. In it, Bright asks to be restored to his position at the head of BARDA and for the launching of an investigation into his removal.

In the complaint, Bright relates in considerable detail his repeated warnings beginning in early January of the dangers of the virus to the US population and the need to address the shortage of critical supplies such as masks, respirators and swabs. Citing emails and other communications, he explains that his efforts evoked skepticism and hostility from his superiors in the Department of Health and Human Services, including HHS Secretary Alex Azar.

Bright also describes his battles with his superiors at HHS over President Trump's promotion of the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine. While documenting

disputes with his superior, Dr. Robert Kadlec, over the awarding of contracts to drug companies connected to an industry consultant and associate of Kadlec, Bright says his removal was triggered by his opposition to making hydroxychloroquine available to the general public without its having been properly tested as a treatment for COVID-19.

"I was pressured to let politics and cronyism drive decisions over the opinions of the best scientists we have in government," Bright told reporters after he filed his complaint. In the document, he asserts that he was removed from his leading role in the vaccine program and shunted into a lower-level position at the National Institutes of Health because he tried to "prioritize science and safety over political expediency."

He notes that weeks before his removal, when he was pressing for urgent action to address the coronavirus threat, he was excluded from meetings on the issue.

The Trump administration downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic until it triggered a steep decline in the stock market in February and early March. Once the bipartisan drive began toward the end of March to pass the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act, guaranteeing unlimited supplies of government cash to protect the wealth of major investors, the stock market turned around and began a record surge that has continued into May.

With the enactment of the bailout, passed unanimously in the Senate, including the votes of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, and overwhelmingly backed by the Democrats in the House, Trump began his campaign for a return to work and reopening of businesses, despite the continuing rise in infections and deaths from the pandemic.

Following Bright's removal, administration officials accused him of having poorly managed his office,

mistreated staff and failed to consult with his superiors. However, his most recent performance review from May 2019, according to CNN, which obtained a copy, praised Bright's management of his office and included no criticisms.

Bright is scheduled to testify next week before the House of Representatives' Health Subcommittee, headed by Democratic congresswoman Anna Eshoo of California.

The whistleblower complaint states: "Dr. Bright pressed for urgent access to funding, personnel and clinical specimens, including viruses, which he emphasized were all critically necessary to begin development of lifesaving medicines needed in the likely event that the virus spread outside of Southeast Asia. Secretary Azar and Dr. Kadlec responded with surprise at Dr. Bright's dire predictions and urgency and asserted that the United States would be able to contain the virus and keep it out of the United States."

Bright cites a January email from the co-owner of a mask production firm saying he was willing to reactivate idled N95 mask production lines with government assistance, an offer that was ignored.

Bright told reporters that he and other scientists found the administration's "eagerness to push blindly forward without sufficient data" on the hydroxychloroquine "alarming." He said: "I could not in good conscience ignore the scientific recommendations to limit access to those drugs under the direct care of a doctor, and instead allow political ambition and timelines to override scientific judgment."

He added that one Trump official who appeared to recognize the gravity of the outbreak was Trump's trade adviser Peter Navarro, who warned about the danger of a major health crisis in the US. Navarro was pushing for an early emphasis on the virus primarily from the standpoint of scapegoating China for the pandemic and using it to escalate Washington's trade war and military preparations against Beijing.

There are numerous ties between the Trump administration and companies involved in the production of hydroxychloroquine. One of the largest shareholders in the main producer of the drug, the French firm Sanofi, is Fisher Asset Management, an investment company run by Ken Fisher, a major donor to Republicans, including Trump.

Another investor in the firm is Invesco, the fund previously run by Wilbur Ross, Trump's commerce secretary. As of 2019, Trump reported that his three family trusts each had investments in a mutual fund

whose largest holding was Sanofi.

Azar himself, a multimillionaire, was a top executive at the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly and lobbyist for the drug industry before joining the Trump administration.

At one point, the whistleblower complaint states that Bright called for an investigation by the inspector general "to help break up the 'cottage industry' of marketing consultants and political influence into these contracts."

Much of the complaint is a detailed account of Bright's long-running battle with Dr. Kaldec, HHS assistant secretary for preparedness and response (ASPR), over cronyism in the awarding of contracts. One section is headed: "Since 2017, Dr. Bright Has Objected to HHS Leadership's Cronyism and Award of Contracts to Companies with Political Connections to the Administration."

Speaking of the tensions between Bright and Kaldec, the document states, "Their relationship had been tense since approximately 2018, when Dr. Bright began raising repeated objections to the outsized role Dr. Kadlec allowed industry consultants to play in securing contracts that Dr. Bright and other scientists and subject matter experts determined were not meritorious."

In particular, Bright singles out the outsized role played by John Clerici, "an industry consultant to pharmaceutical companies with a longstanding connection to Dr. Kadlec, in the award of government contracts." The complaint cites as an example "the efforts of ASPR staff and Mr. Clerici to pressure Dr. Bright to extend a contract with Mr. Clerici's client, Aeolus Pharmaceuticals," whose CEO was "a friend of Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law and a senior advisor to the president."

Kushner is playing a key behind-the-scenes role in the administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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