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HEALTH CARE

Colleagues paint a mixed picture of ousted vaccine chief

Whistleblower Rick Bright makes a powerful case against the president, but may be pressed at Thursday’s hearing about his own claims and record.



Assistant HHS Secretary for Preparedness and Response Robert Kadlec abruptly transferred his top vaccine deputy, Rick Bright, out of his role. | Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo

By **DAN DIAMOND**

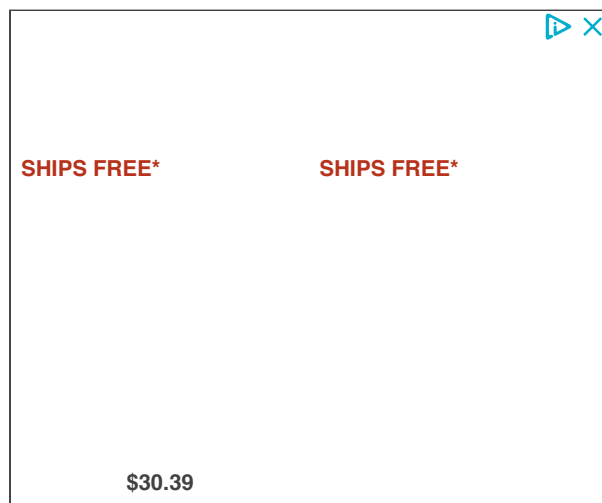
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Some parts of an explosive whistleblower complaint against the Health and Human Services department are beyond dispute.

Rick Bright, the department's ousted vaccine expert, has assembled a [63-page complaint](#) filled with damning allegations: that Trump appointees pressured health officials to rush unproven malaria drugs; that his warnings about mask shortages were ignored; and that senior leaders repeatedly missed opportunities to grapple with threats posed by Covid-19. Those claims are backed up by emails released by Bright, interviews conducted by POLITICO and, in some cases, President Donald Trump's own public statements.

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But some colleagues say Bright's complaint leaves out the full context for the pivotal malaria drug episode, which two current and two former officials say paints a murkier picture of Bright's claims. Some of his allegations about department decisions on Covid-19 don't match officials' statements or the public record. And Bright's central claim that he was ousted for battling Trump appointees over science is less than certain given that some of his own staff

spent months raising concerns about his leadership, including a complaint filed by a person in Bright's office last summer.

As Bright prepares to testify before a House committee on Thursday, his credibility will be a key issue — as will the credibility of Trump appointees like Robert Kadlec, the assistant secretary for preparedness and response who on April 20 abruptly transferred Bright, his top vaccine deputy, to a new role working on coronavirus diagnostics at a different division, the National Institutes of Health.

Bright has yet to accept the transfer, and the Office of Special Counsel on Friday said that Bright [should be temporarily reinstated](#) during an investigation. Meanwhile, HHS officials have spent days going line-by-line through Bright's complaint and are preparing to release a rebuttal by Thursday morning, said two current administration officials.

The episode has reignited frustrations inside the health department and forced people to choose sides between Bright and the Trump administration.

“I think they wanted to get rid of Dr. Bright from the moment they got there,” said a former HHS official, who said that Bright was viewed as an outsider by a tight-knit cadre of Trump appointees who had worked in biodefense, but who declined to be identified to avoid being drawn into the dispute. “They set out on a mission to make his life miserable.”



Rick Bright. | Health and Human Services via AP

But less than a month ago, Bright was sharing praise for the Trump appointee that he and his allies now say was determined to destroy him. “Bob Kadlec is in the right spot at the right time for our country,” Andrew Weber, a former assistant Defense secretary during the Obama administration, [wrote](#) on Twitter on April 17 as he touted [Kadlec’s](#) [ad](#) a message that Bright retweeted

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POLITICO spoke with 12 current and former staff in HHS' emergency response division, as well as other administration officials and outside advisers, and they painted a picture of a demanding boss who inspired some staff but alienated others, unrelated to his dealings with the White House. But they also confirmed the unusual and excessive political pressure put upon the department by Trump and his high-level appointees to ignore questions about the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine's effectiveness on Covid-19 and its possible dangerous side effects.

The health department did not respond to specific questions on Bright's leadership or claims in his complaint. Nor did spokespeople allow interviews with top officials such as Kadlec or the department's top lawyer, Bob Charrow.

"This is a personnel matter that is currently under review," said Caitlin Oakley, HHS spokesperson. "However, HHS strongly disagrees with the allegations and characterizations in the complaint from Dr. Bright."

Bright, through his lawyers, declined a request for an interview, but defended his record.

"In filing this whistleblower complaint, he was prepared for unnamed sources in the administration to try to ruin his reputation," said attorney Debra Katz. "He stands by his claims."



A hero to many health officials

As a whistleblower, Bright has quickly emerged as a hero to many career health officials and even some Trump appointees, who are despondent over how the

Trump administration has handled the pandemic response. Three current officials said that the emergency division — known as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, or ASPR — missed planning opportunities in January, February and March. Instead, Kadlec and other top officials focused on evacuating Americans from [coronavirus-infested cruise ships](#) and bringing hundreds of others back from China — missions that strained the team and did little to prepare for the looming pandemic.

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“ASPR’s not really ‘preparedness and response’ these days,” said one senior official in the division. “It’s just ‘response.’ It should be ASR, not ASPR.”

Two of Kadlec's defenders say that he was focused on rescuing Americans from dangerous situations, a priority that appealed to the retired Air Force officer.

Bright’s complaint and accompanying emails also provide a remarkable window into real-time planning for Covid-19, or lack thereof. For instance, the vaccine expert in January recognized that masks and other key supplies would soon face major shortages — and Bright eventually enlisted White House support in an effort to obtain products like testing swabs when Kadlec failed to act on his warnings, according to emails in his complaint and [news reports](#).

“The most damning part of the complaint is the description of the systematic disregard of all the warnings about the pandemic,” said Nicole Lurie, a Bright defender who preceded Kadlec as the division’s assistant secretary during the

Obama administration and tapped Bright in November 2016 to lead the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority.

But some of Bright's claims don't line up with or mischaracterize the work conducted by other health officials. In his complaint, the vaccine expert says that on Jan. 10, "he began pushing HHS leadership to obtain sequencing and virus samples from China, to no avail" — one of several allegations where Bright says he "acted with urgency to begin to address this pandemic but encountered resistance from HHS leadership, including Secretary [Alex] Azar, who appeared intent on downplaying this catastrophic threat."

Yet by Jan. 10, HHS leaders had already spent a week trying to engage the Chinese government in order to send scientists and obtain virus samples, an effort that would stretch on for more than a month. Meanwhile, Chinese researchers had announced on Jan. 9 they had sequenced the virus and [publicly posted those sequences](#) on Jan. 11 — a development that raises questions about why Bright felt that leaders were ignoring his concerns on Jan. 10 about the need to obtain the viral sequence.

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The health department also had [alerted](#) the White House's National Security Council about the risk of the novel virus on Jan. 2, and a high-level team

quickly began meeting to address the possibility of a pandemic. Meanwhile, Azar's attempts to [privately warn](#) Trump in mid-January were seen as so dire

that some Trump aides dismissed them as "alarmist," POLITICO previously reported.

Bright's lawyer said that the scientist was pushing for greater access to sequences and samples because they were necessary to do his work.

"It is critical to be able to analyze multiple viral sequences and multiple virus samples to determine if the virus is mutating or remaining stable," Katz said.

"To Dr. Bright's knowledge, HHS never received a viral sample from China, and did not have virus samples until [it] obtained them from U.S. cases in late February."

A push for a malaria drug

By mid-March, Trump was promoting the use of malaria drugs as a possible "game changer" in the coronavirus fight, despite scant evidence that the drugs could rein in Covid-19 and over the [increasingly deep concerns](#) of career health officials who wanted the administration to pursue the standard process of clinical trials. The drugs had been promoted on Fox News and by some of Trump's political allies.

"At my direction, the federal government is working to help obtain large quantities of chloroquine," Trump said at a March 23 press briefing, which HHS officials say understated the frantic efforts to meet the president's demands.

Bright alleges that the department's top lawyer, Charrow, applied pressure to rush the malaria drugs and was personally involved in writing aspects of the plan — a point backed up by several emails included in his complaint — even as [career health officials](#) worried about the lack of evidence that the drugs could help treat Covid-19 and the potential risk to patients. According to Bright's lawyers, it was the first time that he recalls the department's top lawyer calling him directly to discuss a drug donation.

Two current officials confirmed Bright's claims that Charrow directly drove the project after Trump spent days in March publicly stumping for his health officials to expand access to the drug. The move radically subverted how FDA was supposed to operate, independent of political influence. Studies have increasingly found that the malaria drugs have no positive effect for Covid-19 and may in fact have negative consequences.

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As a result, Bright acknowledged in his whistleblower complaint that he was a source behind a Reuters story about Trump administration officials' pursuit of the drug. But the email chain that Bright leaked to Reuters was just a partial snapshot of the discussions, and Bright himself entertained the idea of using hydroxychloroquine to treat Covid-19 patients in other emails, according to three people who have seen those messages and described them to POLITICO.

Bright's defenders have acknowledged that he tried to compromise with his bosses over hydroxychloroquine. Katz, his lawyer, emphasized that the scientist only supported the use of the drugs in a controlled, rigorous environment — not the broad plan pursued by the Trump administration.

“He did not support the distribution of these drugs without appropriate controls in place,” said Katz. “And given the latest studies on these drugs, he has been proven right,” she added, an allusion to [recent findings](#) that hydroxychloroquine shows no benefit against Covid-19.

Some officials in the division and elsewhere in HHS said that Bright was trying to raise appropriate concerns about the rush to allow an unproven drug — although he wasn't yet ready to make a public stand and put his future employment at risk.

“He was definitely tapping on the brakes, if you read the emails,” said a senior administration official. “He may not have slammed them.”

A ‘toxic work environment’

Bright has since maintained that his concerns about hydroxychloroquine were a key component of his ouster.

“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,” the vaccine expert said in an April 22 statement.

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But Trump administration officials detailed a series of management challenges, such as how Bright allegedly treated the people who worked for him, that they claim helped convince them that a change was needed well before the Covid-19 outbreak.

Two current and three former staff who worked closely with Bright described a difficult dynamic of frequently changing demands, which they argued manifested in staff turnover; two of Bright's assistants abruptly left the same week in August 2019, and another assistant left the year before.

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“This type of abuse creates a highly stressful and toxic work environment that ultimately ruins productivity towards the BARDA mission,” one staffer wrote in

a complaint about Bright that was shared with division leaders in August 2019 and obtained by POLITICO. “I only feel relief once I leave for the day.”

“To the outside, you can’t see what we see working for him,” said one person who worked closely with Bright last year. “We would get yelled at when we didn’t provide him with documents that didn’t exist.”

Other current and former members of Bright’s team were much more positive about his leadership and said that his personal drive was sometimes misunderstood. “Rick is a passionate, visionary leader, not without flaws, but who always kept the American people’s best interests at the forefront of his decision-making while striving to modernize and improve BARDA,” said one HHS official who worked for him at BARDA.

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“He’s a very intense person,” said another HHS staffer who worked with Bright. “He’s a perfectionist. He expects levels of perfection with people.”

A person who works closely with Bright disputed that the departures of his assistants was unusual, saying that they stemmed from new opportunities and, in one case, inadequate job performance.

Bright’s lawyer also said that he had no knowledge of any workplace complaints. “Neither his boss nor anyone else ever discussed this with him, and it was certainly not reflected in his 2019 performance appraisal, which was stellar,” said Katz, adding that Bright has received “multiple compliments”

from HHS superiors, colleagues at agencies like CDC and members of Congress.

Indeed, Kadlec extensively praised his deputy in last year's review. "Dr. Bright continues to lead change in BARDA with deftness and enthusiasm," Kadlec wrote in the 2019 review obtained by POLITICO. One current and two former officials said that Kadlec had been resistant to moving Bright and was hoping that the good review would help them patch up their relationship.

But, according to some officials, by late 2019, there was growing consensus among HHS leaders that Bright should find a new role.

Bright "treats staff poorly. Goes around his boss. Tries to undercut his leadership. Hires outside contractors without permission," a former Trump appointee alleged in a text to POLITICO on Jan. 2, explaining why there was talk of replacing the vaccine expert — six days before the CDC would issue its [first alert](#) on a mysterious pneumonia outbreak in China.

Years of fault lines, exposed

Bright's whistleblower complaint illuminates fault lines that have been present for years inside the health department's emergency division but have cracked open during the extreme pressures of the pandemic.

One problem: a long-running cold war between current assistant secretary Kadlec and his Obama-era predecessor, Lurie. The two leaders have no relationship, said four current and former officials — unlike how some Trump officials like Medicaid chief Seema Verma and former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb cultivated [cordial relationships](#) with their Obama-era predecessors. Lurie's offers to provide help or guidance ahead of the pandemic were rebuffed.



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Current and former career staff who have worked with both officials said that the two assistant secretaries were quite different in management style and priorities. Kadlec, the former military officer, was heavily focused on biowarfare. Lurie, who's now counseling Washington, D.C., officials on how to reopen the local economy, steered the office more towards public health

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Kadlec and others in the Trump leadership team viewed Bright as effectively an Obama holdover — a career staffer picked by Lurie and others to lead the biomedical team just days after the 2016 election ushered Trump into office. A former official involved in Bright's hiring said that he had been “the unanimous choice” for months and that bureaucratic hold-ups delayed his selection until after the election.

“We had gone through a very deliberate and thoughtful process to choose Dr. Bright,” Lurie said in an interview. “I had seen so much pressure on the funding process over the eight years that I was there, I was quite committed to finding someone who could stand up to it.”

Meanwhile, Kadlec won the support of senior leaders inside the Trump administration, particularly after his team was tapped in 2018 by Azar to reunify thousands of migrant families that the administration had separated at the border. Azar came to view Kadlec as one of his top fixers, even as the HHS secretary [tried to contain his own fight](#) with a deputy.

Kadlec frequently clashed with Bright because his biomedical team had been allocated the [lion's share of funding](#) for the division — \$1.6 billion of the total \$2.6 billion in funds that the department initially requested for the current fiscal year, before Congress more than tripled BARDA's budget in its recent stimulus packages. That perch gave Bright an outsize role in dealing with members of Congress and industry leaders, even as he battled with Kadlec on decisions to fund certain products.

The resulting fights have partially spilled into the press, as Bright and his allies have traded allegations with Kadlec's camp, as each accuses the other of preferential treatment for favored contractors and inappropriate spending decisions. Kadlec also has been heavily scrutinized for shifting the office's focus toward preparing for bioterror attacks and whether he had an [undisclosed conflict of interest](#) when he did so.

“Kadlec bet on bioweapons — and he bet wrong,” said one senior HHS official. “But that doesn't necessarily mean Rick's right about everything either.”

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Bright's own decision to work with a Democrat-aligned publicity firm, SKDKnickerbocker, and hire the legal team that represented Christine Blasey Ford, the accuser of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, has fueled anger that his whistleblower complaint is politically motivated.

"I have known Dr. Rick Bright for more than fifteen years," countered Katz, his lawyer, saying that she represented a family member of Bright in a whistleblower case years ago. "This whistleblower case isn't about politics or what political party the wrongdoers are from."

High stakes for a pressure-packed hearing

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers have sparred ahead of Thursday's unusual hearing, which Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) has rapidly convened over the [frustration](#) of her Republican counterpart, Rep. Michael Burgess (R-Texas). Bright's testimony is expected to capture a national viewing audience, with so many Americans deeply invested in the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic — and still stuck in lockdown.

Democrats are hoping that the spotlight on Bright will reveal ways that Trump botched the outbreak, with some touting him as a star witness to the administration's failures.

"Dr. Bright is a man of integrity," Lurie said.


“Here is a guy who laid out processes and actions to fight a pandemic,” she added, pointing to details in the complaint. “Those processes were disregarded and actions weren’t taken.”

Inside HHS, officials said that leaders don’t see Bright’s testimony as a referendum on their Covid-19 work and are confident that their pending rebuttal will raise questions about his claims. Kadlec has outwardly projected calm and said he wants to stay focused on fighting the outbreak, not Bright’s allegations, said two people who work with him.

“He’s still zeroed in on the mission,” said one official.

Meanwhile, those who know Bright worry that the increasingly intense coverage is distorting the issues he was trying to raise in the first place.

“He understood that the statistics about the pandemic were not just numbers. They were people with families, friends, and names,” said an HHS staffer who worked with Bright. “I think that’s important for people to know about him.”

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