

**COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**WASHINGTON, DC 20515**

September 15, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

I write to request information following an alarming press report describing improper Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) interference with certain Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports enumerating the risks and spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> As the nation continues to grapple with the devastating consequences of this pandemic, any Administration action to manipulate or suppress critical public health information is unconscionable, as it has the potential to increase the risk of COVID-19-related harm.

As you know, the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) series has long served as a critical tool to inform state and local public health officials, health care providers, researchers, and the general public about infectious diseases and other ongoing public health developments—regardless of the political party of the Administration in charge. CDC's website describes the MMWR series as “the voice of CDC,” and “the agency's primary vehicle for scientific publication of timely, reliable, authoritative, accurate, objective, and useful public health information and recommendations.”<sup>2</sup>

The CDC's timely and accurate scientific analysis over the years has undoubtedly saved countless lives and assisted with public health efforts to mitigate the additional spread of infectious diseases both domestically and globally. MMWRs and other CDC reports have for decades played a vital role in raising awareness of initial cases of communicable diseases. The first published scientific account of Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) appeared in an MMWR in the early 1980's under a Republican Administration, mobilizing scientists internationally to focus on and investigate these conditions.<sup>3</sup> When the first coronavirus scare of this century—severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)—occurred in 2003

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<sup>1</sup> Politico, *Trump officials interfered with CDC reports on Covid-19* (Sept. 11, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/11/exclusive-trump-officials-interfered-with-cdc-reports-on-covid-19-412809>.

<sup>2</sup> CDC, *About the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) Series* (last accessed Sept. 14, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/about.html>.

<sup>3</sup> CDC, *Thirty Years of HIV – 1981-2011 MMWR* (last accessed Sept 14, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6021a1.htm>.

under another Republican Administration, the MMWR remained a trusted source of objective scientific information relevant to global efforts to control viral spread.<sup>4</sup> During the novel influenza A (H1N1) virus pandemic in 2009 under a Democratic Administration, early MMWR reports of the H1N1 strain similarly served as a call to action for scientists domestically and around the world.<sup>5</sup> In recent months, such reports have described COVID-19 outbreaks in a range of different settings — including at summer camps, childcare centers, and nursing homes. This decades-long legacy of being a source of objective, life-saving scientific data, no matter the political party of the Administration, should continue to be a source of pride for the CDC.

As such, it is deeply troubling to learn about potential HHS political appointee interference that appears to be watering down the CDC's *scientific* analysis of COVID-19 risks and spread and further delaying public release of critical data. That certain political appointees at HHS are apparently attempting to downplay the potential risks from COVID-19 to children to align with a political message is especially troubling. Just as concerning are reports that a senior HHS political appointee has even accused career government scientists of “sedition” and held an open session on social media describing the need for American citizens to stage an armed revolt.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, these reported actions fit within a troubling pattern of poor judgment this Administration continues to exercise in responding to this pandemic, including tailoring the facts to fit a desired narrative and playing down the severity of the risks of COVID-19 to various populations.

Accordingly, I request that you provide responses to the following by no later than September 22, 2020:

- 1) Has HHS received any guidance or direction from the White House to make changes to MMWRs related to COVID-19? If so, please provide a detailed description of such guidance.
- 2) Please provide the names and titles of any HHS political appointees that have reviewed or provided edits to MMWRs related to COVID-19 prior to their publication.
  - a. Please also provide a clear description of the *scientific* training each of these appointees has received that provides each of them with the requisite skillset to request changes to the type of *scientific* analysis provided in the MMWR.
- 3) How many MMWRs published by CDC about COVID-19 have reflected edits made by HHS political appointees?
  - a. Please provide a summary of the changes to each MMWR made at the request of HHS political appointees, any documents or communications containing suggested

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<sup>4</sup> CDC, Outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome – Worldwide 2003, (last accessed Sept. 14, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5211a5.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> CDC, H1N1 Flu MMWR (last accessed Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020), [https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/pubs/mmwr\\_reports.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/pubs/mmwr_reports.htm).


<sup>6</sup> New York Times, *Trump Health Aide Pushes Bizarre Conspiracies and Warns of Armed Revolt* (Sept. 14, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/us/politics/caputo-virus.html>.

edits to such MMWRs, as well as all draft versions of final MMWR publications that reflected edits from HHS political appointees.

- b. Please provide references to the scientific literature underpinning *each* of these changes.
- 4) Please describe the steps and timeline of the editorial process for MMWR publications in 2019, and how the current editorial process for MMWR publications related to COVID-19 during 2020 differs.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



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Richard E. Neal  
Chairman  
Committee on Ways & Means  
United States House of Representatives