

# *Virus Whistle-Blower Says Trump Administration Steered Contracts to Cronies*

Rick Bright, the ousted chief of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Agency, said he was pressured to steer millions of dollars to the clients of a well-connected consultant.



By **Sheryl Gay Stolberg**

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WASHINGTON — A federal scientist who says he was ousted from his job amid a dispute over an unproven coronavirus treatment pushed by President Trump said Tuesday that top administration officials repeatedly pressured him to steer millions of dollars in contracts to the clients of a well-connected consultant.

Rick Bright, who was director of the Department of Health and Human Services' Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority until his removal in April, said in a formal whistle-blower complaint that he had been protesting “cronyism” and contract abuse since 2017.

Questionable contracts have gone to “companies with political connections to the administration,” the complaint said, including a drug company tied to a friend of Jared Kushner’s, President Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser. It said Dr. Bright was retaliated against by his superiors, who pushed him out because of “his efforts to prioritize science and safety over political expediency.”

The 89-page complaint, filed with the Office of Special Counsel, which protects federal whistle-blowers, also said Dr. Bright “encountered opposition” from department superiors — including Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II — when he pushed as early as January for the necessary resources to develop drugs and vaccines to counter the emerging coronavirus pandemic.

The report provides a window into the inner workings of BARDA, a tiny agency created in 2006 as a response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. It partners with industry in developing “medical countermeasures” that can be stockpiled by the federal government to combat biological or chemical attacks and pandemic threats.

BARDA has spent billions of dollars on contracts with dozens of different suppliers, including major pharmaceutical companies and smaller biotechnology firms.

Both allies and Dr. Bright say his nearly four-year tenure as the head of BARDA was marked by clashes with his superiors — especially Dr. Robert Kadlec, the assistant secretary of health for preparedness and response — and tension with some industry executives. Dr. Bright conceded in the complaint that those clashes came to a head after he leaked information on the dispute over the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine to a reporter from Reuters.

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A lawyer for Dr. Bright, Debra Katz, said he felt a “moral obligation” to get the word out that the administration was pressing to stockpile an unproven and potentially dangerous coronavirus treatment, which was supplied by drugmakers in India and Pakistan and had not been certified by the Food and Drug Administration.

The complaint says top Department of Health and Human Services officials, including Dr. Kadlec, who oversees the strategic national stockpile, overruled scientific experts while awarding contracts to firms represented by the consultant, John Clerici. Mr. Clerici, a founder of a Washington-based firm, Tiber Creek Partners, was instrumental, along with Dr. Kadlec, in writing the legislation that created BARDA.

“Dr. Bright was vocal about his concerns regarding the inappropriate and possibly illegal communications between Mr. Clerici, Dr. Kadlec, Mr. Shuy and Mr. Meekins,” the complaint stated, referring to Bryan Shuy and Chris Meekins, two other department officials.

A spokeswoman for the department, Caitlin Oakley, did not address the complaints about officials there.

“Dr. Bright was transferred to N.I.H. to work on diagnostics testing — critical to combating Covid-19 — where he has been entrusted to spend upward of \$1 billion to advance that effort,” she said in an emailed statement. “We are deeply disappointed that he has not shown up to work on behalf of the American people and lead on this critical endeavor.”

Dr. Bright was initially offered a narrower role at the National Institutes of Health to work on a new “Shark Tank”-style program to develop coronavirus treatments, but Ms. Katz told reporters he “has no role” and did not receive his last paycheck. A spokeswoman, Kendra Barkoff Lamy, later said that, at his doctor’s direction, Dr. Bright “has been on sick leave due to hypertension caused by this current situation.”

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In a statement, Mr. Clerici said he “unequivocally” denied any wrongdoing, adding: “It’s sad that during a pandemic, Dr. Bright and his team have chosen to distract people like Dr. Kadlec, who are critical to the response, with politically motivated allegations. The record is clear that his allegations are false and will be proven so.”

The complaint, written by Ms. Katz and her law partner, Lisa Banks, identifies four specific instances in which Dr. Bright felt Mr. Clerici exerted undue influence. At one point, it said, Dr. 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.”

Dr. Bright also said Mr. Clerici pushed, albeit unsuccessfully, for an extension of a contract awarded to a company run by someone who was “friends with Jared” and “has Hollywood connections.” In a brief interview, Mr. Clerici said the “conversation never happened.”

The document paints Dr. Bright as sounding the alarm about the emerging coronavirus threat and pressing his superiors to do more to prepare — including purchasing masks that would later turn out to be in short supply — at a time when Mr. Azar was downplaying the crisis.

On Jan. 23, he met with Mr. Azar and Dr. Kadlec to press “for urgent access to funding, personnel and clinical specimens, including viruses,” that would be necessary to develop treatments, the complaint said. But Mr. Azar and Dr. Kadlec “asserted that the United States would be able to contain the virus” through travel bans, the complaint said, adding that Dr. Bright was cut out of future department meetings related to Covid-19.

But the complaint says Dr. Bright found an ally in Peter Navarro, Mr. Trump’s trade adviser, who “shared Dr. Bright’s sense of urgency, recognized his expertise and was prepared to help.” In early February, an official from a company that makes masks connected Dr. Bright with Mr. Navarro, and the two met at the White House on Feb. 8, a Saturday, more than a month before Mr. Trump declared a national emergency.

In that meeting, the complaint said, Dr. Bright urged Mr. Navarro to have the government stop exporting high-quality N95 masks, stock up on remdesivir, an antiviral drug approved last week by the F.D.A. to treat Covid-19, and develop a “Manhattan Project” for a vaccine — an idea Mr. Trump recently adopted.

Mr. Navarro invited Dr. Bright back the following day to help him draft recommendations for the president’s coronavirus task force — a move that angered top department officials, the complaint said.

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If you’ve been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have, and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

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This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: “How will we know when to reopen the

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