

Viewpoint: US government's coronavirus response a 'living nightmare'

It sounds like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has become completely dysfunctional. The Secretary, Dr. Azar (ex-lobbyist and President of Eli Lilly), apparently can't get [along](#) with his administrator of Medicare, Seema Verma. He led the FDA and CDC (HHS agencies) as they failed to protect the US population because of their [disastrous](#) early approach to coronavirus testing. And on and on

BARDA (an HHS agency) director Rick Bright was [transferred](#) to NIH after warning in January about the potential of a pandemic hitting the US and then hesitating to release large supplies of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine without more evidence that this treatment for coronavirus infection was safe and effective. He accuses the HHS of a disregard for science and for cronyism in the award of BARDA contracts. He states that his transfer to NIH was retaliation.

Some of the CDC guidelines on dealing with coronavirus defy logic and science. A good example is the [guideline](#) on essential workers stating that they should be allowed to work after a known COVID-19 exposure unless they are symptomatic. This in spite of our knowledge that at least 25% of transmissions occur via pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic individuals.

The CDC's most recent detailed guidelines for re-opening the economy were [rejected](#) by the administration for being "too prescriptive." There are guidelines on criteria for re-opening from the CDC posted on the Whitehouse and CDC websites. Many states that are re-opening are ignoring them.

The federal government planned to [screen](#) airport travelers for fever to instill confidence that flying was safe again. The CDC refused to participate saying the effort required was too costly and that the screening was ineffective anyway.

The White House eschewed [masks](#) even though they were recommended by the CDC only to reverse course after several positive cases among their staff. The President and Vice President were, of course, to be excepted from the requirement to wear masks in the West Wing.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, recently [said](#) that she had no confidence in the coronavirus case and death statistics being provided by the CDC. While she (apparently) was complaining that the numbers were inflated, I (along with many experts) believe that the CDC was significantly undercounting both for lack of testing and because our methods of attributing deaths to the virus are antiquated.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other 'disruptive' innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

The NIH recently [revoked](#) a grant, renewed under the Trump administration, that supported a research collaboration between a U.S. non-profit called Eco-Health Alliance and laboratory studying bat viruses in

Wuhan, China. Apparently, the cancellation of funding was related to a debunked conspiracy theory that the Wuhan lab was the source of the COVID-19. This has been disproven many times over by now. The head of Eco-Health, Peter Daszac, had warned of the coming SARS pandemic back in 2003 and researches the animal origins of human viral infections. His collaboration with the Wuhan lab was key to identifying the anti-coronavirus activity of remdesivir – currently the only specific anti-viral therapy approved by the FDA for treatment of the disease.

This is a living nightmare. Who could have imagined what is happening to U.S. science during the worst pandemic since the 1918-1919 influenza?

If anyone is still optimistic that the US will be funding the incentives that we need to restore our antibiotic pipeline in the near future, just look around you.

David Shlaes has a Ph.D in Microbiology and M.D. from Case Western Reserve and is a member of the American Council on Science and Health Scientific Advisory Panel

A version of this article previously ran at the [American Council on Science and Health](#) and has been republished here with permission. The Council can be found on Twitter [@ACSHorg](#)