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Media reports reveal political interference at the US CDC

News accounts say that Trump administration officials wanted to edit and approve COVID-19 studies and publish guidance without the usual scientific review. Susan Jaffe reports.

After news stories about attempts by members of the Trump administration to manipulate COVID-19 reports published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and over-rule its scientists, one top official is taking a sudden leave of absence for health reasons. Another's government contract has abruptly ended. The 2-month absence of Michael Caputo, chief spokesman for the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), comes after he claimed, according to news reports, to have said that a CDC "resistance unit" seeks to undermine Trump. He and an adviser reportedly demanded the right to revise and approve COVID-19 studies published in the CDC's highly respected *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* journal.

Politico first revealed how Caputo's science adviser, Paul Alexander, tried to influence the journal. "CDC to me appears to be writing hit pieces on the administration", read one of Alexander's emails obtained by *Politico*. "The reports must be read by someone outside of CDC like myself, and we cannot allow the reporting to go on as it has been, for it is outrageous. It's lunacy", he wrote.

Alexander told CDC Director Robert Redfield in another email quoted by *Politico*, "Nothing to go out unless I read and agree with the findings how they CDC, wrote it and I tweak it to ensure it is fair and balanced and 'complete'". Several outlets verified *Politico's* account that Caputo and Alexander tried to revise, delay, and even block CDC studies.

Alexander was identified by *Politico* as an assistant professor of health research at McMaster University in Canada, but school officials told *The New York Times* that he is not currently teaching and that his position is unpaid.

Caputo is a long-time Trump campaign aide with "not a lot of

experience in health care", he said in a podcast earlier this month. He was recruited by Trump in April, 2020, to lead communications at HHS, which includes the CDC, according to *Politico*.

Following the *Politico* article, *The New York Times* ran a story on Sept 15 about Caputo's Facebook

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Live chat 2 days earlier, in which he said that CDC scientists' handling of the COVID-19 emergency amounted to "sedition". According to *The New York Times*, Caputo told his Facebook audience: "There are scientists who work for this government who don't want America to get well, not until Joe Biden is president." His Facebook and Twitter accounts have since been shut down.

Along with Caputo's temporary leave, HHS announced that Alexander would no longer be employed by the agency. HHS and CDC declined to respond to questions about the two men for this report.

Tom Frieden, who directed the CDC from 2009 to 2017, told *The Lancet* that those changes are not enough to end attempts to muzzle CDC scientists. "We're still not hearing from the subject matter experts at the CDC", he said, naming four people including Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases. Messonnier disappeared from press briefings after she warned in late February that COVID-19 will spread across the USA, and may severely disrupt everyday life.

Even Redfield was rebuked by Trump last week after telling a Senate committee that a vaccine would be

ready by mid-2021 and that wearing a mask offers the best protection against the virus. Hours later, Trump told reporters that Redfield "made a mistake". A vaccine is more effective, and could be available in a few weeks, Trump said.

Frieden said the CDC yielded to political pressure by making changes to guidance on its website "that are not scientifically justifiable". In one example he cited, the CDC advised that only people with symptoms of infection need to be tested even though the virus can be spread by asymptomatic individuals. This material was "clearly written in Washington", he said, not by the CDC, based in Atlanta, GA. Last week, the CDC revised the advisory. *The New York Times* later gave other examples of CDC guidance that bypassed the agency's typical scientific review.

Wesley Self, associate professor of Emergency Medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (Nashville, TN, USA), said his experience working with *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* has been very positive, most recently as senior author of a study about COVID-19 and dining at restaurants. The integrity of the data "is foremost, as we are presenting findings to the public", he said. "I would find it very concerning if any journal was asking investigators to change data."

The House of Representatives' Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis has launched an investigation, demanding interviews with top CDC officials along with documents "related to any effort by HHS political appointees to review, revise, edit, delay or prohibit publication of any *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*... related to the coronavirus".

Susan Jaffe