

Former surgeon general describes Bush administration's interference on science and health issues

By Sandy English
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The former surgeon general, Richard H. Carmona, testified last week before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and described repeated instances of interference by Bush administration officials in the discussion of public health issues. Carmona gave a glimpse into the behavior of an administration that is politically beholden to right-wing Christian fundamentalist organizations and deeply hostile to science.

Carmona, who has held positions in emergency preparedness in Arizona, related how the administration made decisions about his appearances at functions, his public statements and reports from his office based on political and not scientific considerations. During the national debate on stem cell research, for example, administration officials cautioned him to remain silent, and any references to the issue were removed from his speeches.

He described a meeting where senior White House officials discussed global warming as a "liberal issue without merit." He told the committee: "I remember thinking, 'I know why they want me here, they want me to discuss the science; they don't understand the science.' So I had this scientific discussion for about a half an hour, and I was never invited back to the meeting."

On the issue of sexual education Carmona noted, "There was already a policy in place that did not want to hear the science but wanted to preach abstinence only, but I felt that was scientifically incorrect."

He was discouraged from testifying at a 2005 racketeering trial of tobacco industry executives. Administration officials told the prosecuting lawyers in the case that Carmona was not a competent expert.

Carmona testified *New York Times* the Sharon Y. Eubanks, director of the Justice Department's Tobacco Litigation Team, as saying, "He was one of the most powerful witnesses. His testimony was very important."

In the final stages of the trial, administration officials intervened to undermine the prosecution case against the tobacco companies.

Carmona alleged that that his superiors in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) as well as administration officials, whom he refused to identify, attempted to compromise and delay the publication of an important study on the effects of second-hand smoke.

He was discouraged from attending the Special Olympics, a US charity event for the physically and mentally disabled, because, he intimated, the event is associated with the Kennedy family.

Carmona told the committee that his speeches were edited and guidelines were issued by administration operatives. These included an injunction that President Bush be mentioned a minimum of three times per page. He was also encouraged to make speeches on behalf of Republican candidates for public office.

One of the more reactionary acts of interference by the Bush administration was the deliberate delay of a report on the health of prisoners in the United States. Carmona told the House committee, "The correctional healthcare report is pointing out the inadequacies in healthcare within the correctional healthcare system. It would force the government on a course of action to improve that."

In a letter to the *New York Times* on July 13, written in response to the newspaper's report on Carmona's

testimony, Elizabeth Alexander, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project, noted that "Deficient medical care is the leading cause of death among prisoners in this country.... We see cases where prisoners die of untreated gangrene, where their HIV medications are continually interrupted, and where constant delays in treatment lead to the unnecessary spread of deadly cancers."

"The reality is that the nation's doctor has been marginalized and relegated to a position with no independent budget and with supervisors who are political appointees with partisan agendas," Carmona said. "Anything that doesn't fit into the political appointees' ideological, theological or political agenda is ignored, marginalized, or simply buried."

Three other surgeons general, appointed by presidents Reagan and Clinton, testified that they had experienced political interference from their respective administrations. David Sachter, who was appointed by Clinton, and C. Everett Koop, appointed by Reagan, indicated, however, that government interference in the surgeon general's responsibilities had grown under the Bush administration.

As Carmona noted in his statement to the committee, "I turned to my fellow surgeons general ... each agreed that never had they seen Washington DC so partisan or a new surgeon general so politically challenged and marginalized as during my tenure."

Carmona is the most recent in a series of government officials who have complained about the Bush administration's suppression or manipulation of scientific information for its own purposes, in particular, to defer to the views of the Christian fundamentalist right, which is a main prop of the Bush regime.

In March, Elias A. Zerhouni, the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), called the Bush policy on embryonic stem cell research "shortsighted." In January, the head of the NIH's task force on stem cell research, Story Landis, said that the United States is "missing out on possible breakthroughs in the field."

Last year, a leading scientist with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), James E Hanson, accused Bush appointees in NASA's Public Affairs department of censoring information about the dangers of fossil fuel emissions. He also alleged that

officials in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had similarly prevented scientists from discussing their findings on global warming.

In 2005, Susan F. Wood, an assistant commissioner with the Food and Drug Administration, resigned from her position, citing deliberate delaying tactics by the Bush administration over the release of a report about over-the-counter availability of the morning-after contraceptive Plan B.

Although Carmona declined in last week's hearings to name the officials responsible for gagging him, a follow-up article in the *New York Times* named Dr. Cristina V. Beato, a former deputy assistant secretary at the DHHS, as the prime conduit for the implementation of the administration's policies.

Beato, a right-wing Cuban exile, was nominated for assistant secretary of the DHHS in 2004, but not confirmed because of questions over the accuracy of her resume.

Dr. R. Philip Lee, a founder of the Institute for Health Policy Studies and a former government health official, told the *Times*, "Dr. Beato was more ideological and more right-wing, less objective and more political" than the surgeon general.

The current nominee for surgeon general, Dr. James W. Holsinger, was interviewed by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee last Thursday. Much of the questioning revolved around his authorship of a 1991 document written for a committee of the United Methodist Church claiming that homosexual acts have "resulted in an expanded concept of sexually transmitted disease and associated trauma."

The oldest and largest public health organization in the United States, the American Public Health Association (APHA), has sent a letter to the Senate committee opposing the appointment of Holsinger as surgeon general, saying, "The APHA is very concerned with Dr. Holsinger's past writings regarding his views of homosexuality, which put his political and religious ideology before established medical science."

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