

April 1, 2020

Scientific Integrity Officer  
Office of Scientific Integrity  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
4770 Buford Highway, NE  
Atlanta, GA, 30341-3717

On behalf of the Center for Science and Democracy (CSD) within the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), we are filing a scientific integrity complaint. CSD contends a loss of scientific integrity is occurring at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through restricting scientists and public health officials from speaking directly to the public on the coronavirus pandemic.

All evidence suggests that CDC employees have not spoken to the media about the coronavirus pandemic in about three weeks, despite the agency containing a wealth of information on infectious disease control and surveillance. This is at odds with the CDC's Scientific Integrity Policy<sup>1</sup> (under the "Response to Media Inquiries" subsection), which states that "In its communication with the public and the news media, CDC is committed to openness, free exchange of information and data, accuracy, timeliness, and responsiveness... **CDC employees may, consistent with this policy, speak to members of the press about their work** [emphasis added]." Furthermore, it is inconsistent with the CDC's Media Relations Policy<sup>2</sup> (under Section 3A), which states that "**CDC employees may speak to members of the media about their work as outlined in this policy** [emphasis added]."

According to the *Washington Post* on March 19<sup>3</sup>, the CDC has not:

- Held a press briefing on the outbreak since March 9,
- Conducted its own telephone briefings for reporters in more than a week,
- Top CDC officials have rarely appeared on camera or have been quoted in media interviews in recent weeks, and
- The CDC has had to cancel some briefings at the last minute.

One of those canceled briefings, scheduled for March 17<sup>4</sup>, was supposed to be an online briefing with school superintendents to clarify federal guidance for schools planning a course of action during the coronavirus outbreak. Before the briefing was canceled, about 2,400 superintendents and educators had registered, indicating that there is wide interest from the public to hear from CDC experts on the outbreak.

The current lack of media appearances stands in stark contrast to the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. Dr. Nancy Messonnier director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/od/science/docs/CDCSIGuide\\_042516.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/od/science/docs/CDCSIGuide_042516.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CDC Media Relations Policy: Release of Information to News Media, Policy #: CDC-CM-2009-01, Updated 09-03-19

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/03/19/cdc-top-us-public-health-agency-is-sidelined-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/17/schools-confusion-coronavirus-guidelines-134553>

Diseases, warned on February 12<sup>5</sup> that we need to prepare for the novel coronavirus to “take a foothold in the US”. During a news briefing on February 28<sup>6</sup>, Dr. Messonnier and the CDC’s principal deputy director, Dr. Anne Schuchat, warned of an “inevitable” spread of the coronavirus within the US.

As reported by the New York Times on February 27<sup>7</sup>, federal health officials and scientists, including those from the CDC, are now required to coordinate all statements and public appearances on the coronavirus pandemic, and the disease it causes called COVID-19. All communication on the coronavirus pandemic is directed through the Office of the Vice President Mike Pence. This policy has resulted in CDC experts being inhibited from providing the public with the best available scientific information on COVID-19.

The CDC’s scientific integrity policy<sup>8</sup> is supposed to guard against such incidents. Specifically, CSD alleges that the following provisions may have been potentially violated:

- “When CDC learns of confusion about a CDC-issued public health message and determines that clarification or additional information should be published, CDC will take reasonable steps, using plain language, to address confusion.”
  - Confusion inevitably occurred when the CDC advised against gatherings of 50 people or more on March 15<sup>9</sup>, while the next day, the White House<sup>10</sup> released guidelines that advised against gatherings of more than 10 people. However, the CDC has so far failed to clear up this discrepancy.
- Under the CDC’s principles in its communication with the media and public:
  - “CDC communication is science-based, timely, accurate, respectful, credible, and consistent (STARCC).” The principle of “timely” communication by the CDC does not appear to be occurring during this emerging disease crisis.
  - “CDC’s good reputation is not sacrificed for the sake of any past, current, or future employee or partner.” The CDC’s reputation as a vital source of information on disease outbreaks may have been compromised in recent weeks.

The public needs accurate and up-to-date information in order to protect themselves from the novel coronavirus. CDC scientists and health professionals have a wealth of knowledge in disease surveillance and infectious disease control, as well as unparalleled experience communicating complex scientific information while threats are rapidly evolving.

The CDC is a science-based organization that remains committed to its policies to adhere to the highest standards of scientific integrity. Therefore, we urge the agency to investigate these possible violations of

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/us-health-officials-prepare-for-coronavirus-outbreak-to-become-pandemic.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2020/02/25/cdc-coronavirus-inevitable/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/us/politics/us-coronavirus-pence.html>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/od/science/docs/CDCSIGuide\\_042516.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/od/science/docs/CDCSIGuide_042516.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/15/816245252/cdc-recommends-suspending-gatherings-of-50-or-more-people-for-the-next-8-weeks>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/16/trump-recommends-avoiding-gatherings-of-more-than-10-people-132323>

their scientific integrity immediately, as well as any other scientific integrity violations as related to this issue.

CSD does not have conflicts of interest with the CDC or any party related to this complaint.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Rosenberg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Andrew Rosenberg, PhD  
Director, Center for Science and Democracy  
Union of Concerned Scientists

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anita Desikan". The signature is cursive and written above a horizontal line.

Anita Desikan, MPH, MS  
Research Analyst, Center for Science and Democracy  
Union of Concerned Scientists