U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Opening Statement

Chairman Bill Foster (D-IL)
of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
Repurposing Therapeutic Drugs for COVID-19: Research Challenges and Opportunities

Friday, June 19, 2020

Today's hearing revolves around one of humanity's most promising tools in its public health response to the current pandemic: repurposing existing therapeutic drugs to treat COVID-19. The appeal of repurposing existing therapeutics is obvious. These drugs have already been developed; they have already been manufactured, and in many cases can quickly be accessed in large quantities; and for drugs that have already been approved to treat other diseases, a certain amount of safety data is already available to regulators. In the absence of any COVID-19 vaccine or novel treatment, existing therapeutics could potentially offer critical assistance for severely ill patients and bridge the gap until more prevention and treatment options become available.

But with great promise comes great temptation. Since existing therapeutics rest at our fingertips and have demonstrated benefits in other circumstances, it can be all too easy in the midst of a pandemic to cut corners and seek shortcuts to longstanding regulatory processes. We cannot allow this to happen. The evaluation process to repurpose approved drugs exists for a reason: to ensure that existing therapeutics, which could carry significant health risks for COVID-19 patients, are assessed through the prism of scientific and medical data and sanctioned on the basis of factual evidence regarding safety and efficacy in their new context. While the process itself should be flexible, the integrity of the process must be firmly upheld. The research community's evidence-based evaluation of existing therapeutics must be paramount, and political considerations must never enter into the equation for any specific treatment. If politics is allowed to interfere, scientific research may be distorted, patients may be placed at risk, and the faith of the public may be shaken.

Unfortunately, we are seeing the consequences of political interference in the controversy surrounding two existing therapeutic drugs, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. In March, the FDA issued an Emergency Use Authorization for the drugs as COVID-19 treatments. The scientific evidence to support this decision was dangerously thin, but the political considerations were clear: President Trump had become the world's loudest cheerleader for both drugs. Researchers, experts, and former FDA officials all criticized the decision for lacking a sufficient scientific basis. Now, nearly three months later, the FDA just this week revoked the EUA,

acknowledging clinical data showing that the drugs "may not be effective to treat COVID-19" and that the "potential benefits for such use do not outweigh its known and potential risks." This is a clear example of the dangers of allowing political considerations to distort a process reliant upon unbiased scientific evaluation.

This hearing will explore the importance of supporting scientific research into repurposing existing therapeutics as COVID-19 treatments, and the costs of neglecting science when politics intrudes. The research community is currently engaged in a heroic effort to explore as many existing therapeutics as possible in the search for a COVID treatment. The federal government supports some of these efforts, but there may be more we can do as policymakers to provide researchers with the funding and the conditions they need to make progress. There may also be more we can do to uphold the integrity of the role of science as the foundation for federal efforts in this area. Our witnesses bring diverse perspectives with deep experience on these issues. I look forward to learning from them about the most effective way for the federal government to support research into repurposing existing therapeutics, now and for the next pandemic.