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

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Hearing:
Coronaviruses: Understanding the Spread of Infectious Diseases and Mobilizing Innovative Solutions
Thursday, March 5, 2020

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing. We have an excellent panel of witnesses today, all experts in their field. I look forward to a robust discussion of how science can help control and mitigate the effects of emerging infectious diseases, especially in light of this recent coronavirus outbreak.

Unfortunately, outbreaks of new infectious diseases are happening more often and infecting more people. Changing ecosystems, economic development and land use, climate and weather, and international travel and commerce are all examples of ecological, environmental, and social factors that are increasing the emergence and spread of disease. The size of the current COVID-19 outbreak has created a public health crisis with significant international dimensions. A successful public health response relies on science—not only through rapid and robust research during an outbreak, but through sustained investments in research and development between epidemics.

As more people interact with technology in their day-to-day lives, we have new ways of harnessing data. Scientists are developing modeling techniques that use artificial intelligence to predict where viruses may emerge and how far they'll spread. Policymakers use these programs to inform efforts that seek to prevent and control the spread and impact of disease. We also rely on scientists to develop diagnostic tests and treatment options and evaluate new drugs and vaccines. It is clear how our research and development investments directly impact our ability to prepare and respond to global emergencies. Every decision we make must be rooted in science.

The outbreak of global viruses is often followed by the spread of misinformation, especially about how or where the virus originated and the government's response to control it. A whole country or group of people may be singled out as the source of the problem—rather than the pathogen. This is hardly a new phenomenon, but the spread of misinformation during this current outbreak has been accelerated by social media. The World Health Organization has even labeled this outbreak an "infodemic," meaning there is so much information out there that it is hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.

Given that COVID-19 is a new disease, it is understandable that its emergence and spread may cause confusion, anxiety, and fear. But if we let these emotions guide us, instead of science, we will see the rise of harmful stereotypes that will prevent people from accessing the health care they need. We have already seen reports of public stigmatization against people from areas affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Coupled with the health impacts of the virus itself, this is of grave concern.

According to the World Health Organization, recent disease outbreaks like SARS, MERS, Ebola, and Zika have highlighted the need to use social science to fight deadly disease outbreaks and epidemics. Additional investments in social science research on combatting misinformation during outbreaks could improve prevention and control efforts and strengthen global public health communication. We need a holistic research and development response now more than ever.

As the first nurse elected to Congress, I have been dedicated to public health my entire career. Our Committee may not have jurisdiction over the Health and Human Services agencies, but we have long had a role in amplifying the voices of our nation's best scientists and bringing them to the forefront on an issue. Thousands have been affected by COVID-19. We do not know how many more will be. We must do everything in our power to ensure that science guides our response to this outbreak and prepares us for the future.

Thank you all for being here this morning. And I thank Vice-Chair Bera for his leadership on this issue.