

Former U.S. top doc:

Bush officials interfered for political reasons

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- Story Highlights Dr. Richard Carmona, the nation's 17th surgeon general
- Said administration stopped a speech thought to benefit a Bush opponent
- Said he was told to change a scientific report "or you're not going to release it"
- Said administration didn't want to hear the science

WASHINGTON (AP) -- President Bush's most recent surgeon general accused the administration Tuesday of muzzling him for political reasons on hot-button health issues such as emergency contraception and abstinence-only education.



Dr. Richard Carmona told lawmakers that the Bush administration interfered with his work as U.S. surgeon general.

Dr. Richard Carmona, the nation's 17th surgeon general, told lawmakers that all surgeons general have had to deal with politics but none more so than he.

For example, he said he wasn't allowed to make a speech at the Special Olympics because it was viewed as benefiting a political opponent. However, he said he was asked to speak at events designed to benefit Republican lawmakers.

"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," said Carmona, who served from 2002 to 2006.

Responding, the White House said Carmona was given the authority and had the obligation to be the leading voice for the health of all Americans.

"It's disappointing to us if he failed to use his position to the fullest extent in advocating for policies he thought were in the best interests of the nation," said Deputy Press Secretary Tony Fratto. "We believe Dr. Carmona received the support necessary to carry out his mission."

Confirmation hearings are scheduled to be held Thursday for Dr. James Holsinger Jr., the Kentucky cardiologist Bush nominated as the nation's 18th surgeon general. The nomination has been criticized by gay rights groups.

Carmona testified Tuesday at a hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Also appearing were Drs. C. Everett Koop, who served as surgeon general from 1981-1989, and David Satcher, who served from 1998-2001.

"Political interference with the work of the surgeon general appears to have reached a new level in this administration," said committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-California.

Koop is probably the most recognized former surgeon general. He talked about AIDS as a public health issue rather than a moral issue, which won him many admirers and some critics. He said President Reagan was pressed to fire him every day, but Reagan would not interfere.

Koop said that after he left office he had more access to the secretary of Health and Human Services than his successor, Satcher, and that embarrassed him. "Dr. Carmona was treated with even less respect than Dr. Satcher," Koop said.

A report condemning secondhand smoke was a hallmark of Carmona's tenure. Another report, on global health challenges, was never released after the administration demanded changes that he refused to make, Carmona said.

"I was told this would be a political document or you're not going to release it." Carmona said. "I said it can't be a political document because the surgeon general never releases political documents. I release scientific documents that will help our elected officials and the citizens understand the complex world we live in and what their responsibilities are."

He refused to identify the officials who sought the changes.

Carmona said he believed the surgeon general should show leadership on health issues. But his speeches were edited by political appointees, and he was told not to talk about certain issues. For example, he supported comprehensive sex education that would include abstinence in the curriculum, rather than focusing solely on abstinence.

"However, there was already a policy in place that didn't want to hear the science, but wanted to -- quote, unquote -- 'preach abstinence,' which I felt was scientifically incorrect," Carmona said.