



Trump shouldn't overhype chloroquine, despite reasons for optimism: experts

Sean Phillip Cotter

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Chloroquine, the antimalarial drug President Trump has been hyping as one of the coronavirus “game changers,” shows promise in fighting the disease — but experts say the president should hit the brakes on publicly touting it.

“I don’t think it’s advisable for a layperson to get people all excited about something that may turn out to be a disappointment,” said Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a Cato Institute fellow, though he also sees promise in the drug. “You’re dealing with a very frightened public.”

Dr. Daniel Kuritzkes, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, said, “There’s reason to study the drug.” But he said, “It’s really premature for us to be recommending hydroxychloroquine for patients because there’s no data recommending its efficacy.”

Chloroquine was developed is an antimalarial drug in the 1950s, when there was a global public-health effort against malaria. That drug and its analogue hydroxychloroquine continue to be used as antimalarials, and in recent decades have become common treatments for certain autoimmune diseases, including lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.

Studies around the world have shown that both versions of the drug can stop the spread of the virus in a laboratory setting. There was also a very small study in France that has caused optimism in that the virus was detected much less in patients after they took the drugs, though the trial didn’t assess whether their symptoms got better.

But all of that is encouraging, say scientists who say that the fact that now the drug is being studied in much larger, more rigorous trials in the U.S. and other countries, including massive efforts beginning in New York in partnership with the feds. All this encouraging news has been enthusiastically received by Trump, who has trumpeted the drug in press conferences and all-caps tweets.

“HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine,” Trump tweeted Saturday.

There’s been a run on hydroxychloroquine in the days since, leading to the drug being cleared off the shelves in some drug stores, leading the Lupus Foundation of America to raise concerns

that people who currently are prescribed the drug won't be able to get it. There also was a couple in Arizona who are reported to have eaten fish-tank cleaner because it contained chloroquine, killing a man and sending his wife to the hospital.

But Singer said, "As a clinician, I'm encouraged by what I'm reading about chloroquine," adding he'd consider prescribe it to people with severe cases of COVID-19.

Tobe Berkovitz, a communication professor at Boston University, said times like these are when a president has to be careful with his words.

"When you have a crisis situation, whether it's national security or national health, it changes the landscape of how the president communicates — the stakes are so high for everyone," Berkovitz said. He said that Trump's usual bluster is one thing in the ongoing political wrangling with Democratic leaders who are playing their own politics over the economic recovery, "But when it comes to health, rely on the experts."