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Alex Azar's controversial qualifications

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When President Donald Trump nominated Alex Azar last month to lead the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), supporters said his experience working in government and the pharmaceutical industry more than qualified him for the job.

HHS is the largest civilian agency in the federal government, with a budget of \$1.15 trillion. It includes the Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institutes of Health. It also operates health insurance programs for the more than 100 million Americans in Medicare, Medicaid, the Indian Health Service, and the Affordable Care Act's marketplaces.

But critics say Azar has the wrong kind of experience. When he appeared before Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) last month, the committee's senior Democrat Patty Murray of Washington said if Azar runs HHS then "the fox is guarding the hen house."

Azar joined Eli Lilly, the Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical firm, as a senior vice president in 2007 to oversee the company's effort to lobby federal and state governments. He later became president of Lilly operations in the United States until he left earlier this year to establish a pharmaceutical and health insurance consulting firm.

Azar's industry experience is "a plus," said Sen. Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican and the committee's chairman.

"My own view is that, that's a big help, because having some familiarity with—drug pricing is such a Byzantine situation that someone who did not know anything about that, or much about it, by the time they came in—they'd be gone before they even figured out 5 percent of how we might lower drug prices," he said.

But while Azar was at Lilly, the company increased its price for its insulin drugs by 20.8 percent in 2014, 16.9 percent in 2015, 7.5 percent in 2016, and another 7.8 percent in the first quarter of 2017. These price hikes attracted the attention earlier this year of the attorneys general of California, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Washington which have asked Lilly for information "relating to the pricing of our insulin products," the company stated in financial documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. (A spokeswoman for the Washington state attorney general said she could not comment on pending investigations, including confirming whether they exist.)



WASHINGTON, DC—NOVEMBER 29, 2017: Alex Azar testifies during a Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on his nomination to be Health and Human Services secretary on Capitol Hill

Reuters/Yuri Gripas

"Alex Azar's role and Eli Lilly's involvement in price gouging must be fully investigated and revealed before he is put in charge of America's health needs," according to Congressional Progressive Caucus leaders Arizona Democrat Rep. Raúl M Grijalva, Wisconsin Democrat Mark Pocan and Illinois Democrat Jan Schakowsky. In a letter to members of the Senate finance and HELP committees, the group asked for a delay in Azar's nomination until the drug pricing investigations have concluded.

Questioned about Lilly's price increases, Azar agreed there was a problem.

"The current system of pricing insulins and other medicines may meet the needs of many stakeholders, but that system is not working for the patients who have to pay out-of-pocket," he said. "That's why the president, so many members of this committee on a bipartisan basis, and I have talked about the need to fix this system."

Azar will also testify before the Senate Committee on Finance, which is responsible for deciding whether to approve his appointment as HHS secretary. The committee is expected to vote on the matter in January.

Before working at Lilly, Azar, an attorney who graduated from Yale Law School, held the number two post at HHS as deputy secretary during the George W Bush administration. He managed a budget of \$698 billion and had "more than 66 000 employees reporting up to him," according to his LinkedIn profile. While at HHS, he was part of the response team handling the anthrax attacks following 9/11 and the SARS and monkey pox threats. He also helped roll out the