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Executive At 'Pharma Bro' Company Sues Over Alleged Sexual Assault And Harassment



Nancy Retzlaff was given the difficult task of helping to defend Turing Pharmaceuticals after its founder Martin Shkreli was arrested by the FBI and was made to testify in front of Congress amid an outcry over Turing's decision to hike a drug price 20-fold. As Shkreli pled the Fifth, Retzlaff defended the company.

But for all that work, she says she was sexually assaulted and harassed by a company executive who told her she would only become CEO if she gave into his advances. Then, the company allegedly retaliated against her after the executive was ousted over his conduct.

In a complaint filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on Monday obtained by ThinkProgress, Retzlaff says that her performance at the company "was at all times exceptional," a performance that became particularly important amid the scandal. After Shkreli was removed as CEO and the company's shareholders indicated that they didn't want the interim

CEO to stay on, Retzlaff says she assumed many chief executive duties and became a candidate to take over the position permanently.

But on a trip to Washington, D.C. in mid-March 2016 to prepare company executives for the hearings before Congress, the complaint says that Edwin Urrutia, a co-founder of Turing, started moving “uncomfortably close” to Retzlaff while the two were having drinks at a hotel bar. Even though she protested, the complaint says, he “attempted to snuggle up to me at the bar” and “relentlessly” tried to kiss her. All the while, he talked about her ambitions to become company CEO.

“The message to me was clear,” Retzlaff writes in her complaint, “if I wanted to be CEO, I would have to give in to Mr. Urrutia’s sexual demands.”

She continued to reject his advances and left the bar, but she alleges that Urrutia followed her to the elevator and blocked her from getting off at her floor, demanding that she come to his room for a drink. Once inside his hotel room, the complaint says, he threw her on the bed, groping her breasts and body, kissing her against her will, and attempting to pull off her tights, despite her pleas that he stop.

After “struggling for many minutes,” the complaint says, she was able to get out of the room. But the problems with Urrutia allegedly didn’t stop there.

Less than two months later, Urrutia started rubbing her leg with his at a work dinner even though she made it clear it was unwelcome, the complaint says. At a hotel bar after the dinner he “spent the rest of the evening hanging around me and hitting on me,” she says. When she left to go home, he allegedly followed her out of the hotel, but she was able to get into a taxi.

Then weeks after that incident, Retzlaff claims Urrutia became “extremely intoxicated” at a company event at a bar and started touching her, pressing his body against hers even though she tried to move away. He also asked her to “come home” with him. The complaint says Retzlaff was so rattled that she got two coworkers to come with her when she left the bar, but even so Urrutia followed her down the street before she was able to get in a cab.

In an email, Turing said, “The Company has not yet seen the complaint but will vigorously defend itself,” declining to comment further. Mr. Urrutia could

not be immediately reached for comment.

After the final incident, a coworker complained to company executives about Urrutia's behavior. Turing then hired an outside firm to conduct an investigation, which, according to the complaint, found reports of sexual harassment were "substantiated." The company then forced him to resign.

Yet Retzlaff says she was made to suffer for that outcome. The complaint notes that Shkreli was "very upset" that Urrutia was ousted given that they are "very good friends" and he could no longer be put on Turing's board of directors. After Urrutia left, Retzlaff says, her relationship with Shkreli "completely changed," from a positive one to one in which he abruptly stopped communicating with her.

She was allegedly denied a bonus of 30,000 company stock units that she had been promised before the incidents with Urrutia and informed that she wouldn't be getting the job of CEO. The complaint also claims that the human resources executive who initiated the investigation into Urrutia was fired.

Then on July 27, she claims that a former managing director and current shareholder in Turing sent her threatening texts with messages such as "GO FUCK YOURSELF," "I hope you are fired yesterday," and "Your employment is probably Turing's biggest mistake."

He also sent her a text directly related to the sexual harassment incidents: "I was present during the what [sic] you called sexual harassment from Edwin. It is complete bullshit. You are just leveraging to obtain power."

"It is clear that the retaliation committed against me is directed from the top of the Company," Retzlaff says in the complaint.

She still works at the company as chief commercial officer. She is seeking "all available and appropriate relief" for what she says happened to her.