

Trump taps anti-vaccine activist to chair vaccine safety panel

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Outspoken vaccine critic Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. said he had accepted an offer by the Trump administration to chair a panel on “vaccine safety and scientific integrity” after his meeting on Tuesday with the president-elect.

Kennedy, the son of Senator Robert Kennedy, has for the past decade promoted the debunked claim that vaccinations are linked to autism. He recently referred to the purported harms from vaccines as a “holocaust” in a 2015 email exchange with a *Newsweek* reporter, and in comments made at the screening of an anti-vaccination film.

“President-elect Trump has some doubts about the current vaccine policies, and he has questions about it,” Kennedy told reporters after the meeting.

Facing immediate and widespread criticism over the announcement, the Trump team appeared to backtrack with transition spokeswoman Hope Hicks saying in a statement later that day that Trump was only “exploring the possibility of forming a commission on autism” and that “no decisions have been made at this time.”

Trump promoted the false claim that there is a link between vaccinations and childhood autism in several comments made during his campaign.

“Just the other day, 2-years-old, 2½-years-old, a child, a beautiful child went to have the vaccine, and came back, and a week later got a tremendous fever, got very, very sick, now is autistic,” Trump said at a 2015 Republican debate.

Trump’s commission on vaccines and autism, especially if headed by Kennedy, will inevitably come to conclusions at odds with the scientific consensus within the medical community and threaten public health and safety.

“That’s very frightening; it is difficult to imagine anyone less qualified to serve on a commission for vaccine science,” Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of

Medicine, told the *Washington Post*.

“Our nation’s public health will suffer if this nascent neo-antivaxxer movement is not stopped immediately,” Hotez said.

“The mere creation of the commission, meant to investigate a question that has already been asked and answered many times over, is ominous, even aside from the anti-vaccine agenda both men unmistakably share,” pediatrician Daniel Summers wrote in an opinion piece for the *Post*.

“Given Trump’s disdain for facts that inconveniently conflict with his opinions, to believe the commission will land on the side of vaccination requires an optimism bordering on the deranged,” Summers wrote.

The claim that there is a link between vaccinations and autism can be traced back to a discredited 1998 study published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. The lead author of the study, British doctor Andrew Wakefield and his colleagues, argued that there was a possible link between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, based on data from 12 children with developmental disorders.

The paper’s findings were announced at a press conference before publication and set off a panic in the United Kingdom over vaccine safety. Wakefield continued to fan fears, repeating his claims in papers published in minor journals in 2001 and 2002, while offering no additional evidence.

A 2004 investigative report by Brian Deer, a journalist with the *Sunday Times*, found that Wakefield had several undisclosed conflicts of interests, including filing patents on a rival vaccine and receiving payments from a British trial lawyer seeking evidence to use against vaccine manufacturers. In 2009, Deer discovered evidence that Wakefield had manipulated data and misreported results contained in the 1998 paper.

A 2010 investigation by the General Medical Council

(GMC), the UK body responsible for licensing doctors, found that Wakefield had acted “dishonestly and irresponsibly” in his research and committed many ethical violations.

In 2011, Deer published an article in the *British Medical Journal* describing evidence that Wakefield planned to set up a business venture to profit off the vaccination scare, such as through the sale of kits to diagnose children with autism, which he and his partners believed would pull in \$43 million a year.

In response to these findings, the GMC removed Wakefield from the medical register so that he could no longer practice medicine in the UK, while *The Lancet* issued a full retraction of the 1998 paper.

Wakefield subsequently moved to the United States where he continues to promote anti-vaccination falsehoods, nurturing the “anti-vaxxer” movement his “research” helped initiate. He directed and co-wrote the misleading 2016 anti-vaccination documentary *Vaxxed*. He denies all the accusations against him, claiming that he is the victim of an elaborate conspiracy.

Trump reportedly met with Wakefield in August during his presidential campaign.

In response to the 1998 paper, multiple large-scale epidemiological studies were conducted, none of which found a link between autism and vaccination. A 2012 systematic review of the evidence by the Cochrane Collaboration, looking at the findings of 54 different scientific studies, found “no association” between the MMR vaccine and autism (and several other conditions). The same conclusion was reached by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics and the UK National Health Service.

Wakefield’s fraudulent and discredited claims about the link between autism and vaccines led many parents in the United States and Europe to not vaccinate (or not fully vaccinate) their children, resulting in several measles outbreaks.

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease that produces a rash that spreads across the body. It can often be deadly due to complications associated with the disease, especially in children living in areas with poor public health infrastructure.

The first vaccine for measles was made available in 1963 and a combined MMR vaccine was released in 1971.

According to the World Health Organization, in 1980, prior to widespread vaccination, the disease was

responsible for an estimated 2.6 million deaths annually. Between 2000 and 2015, measles vaccinations resulted in a 79 percent decline in measles deaths. Still, efforts to eradicate the disease worldwide have been hampered by a lack of funding, along with the widespread poverty and abhorrent social conditions found in the so-called developing world. There were 134,200 deaths globally from measles in 2015, primarily in Africa and Southeast Asia.

In England and other European countries, the reduced vaccination rates due to concerns caused by Wakefield’s paper led to increasing numbers of measles cases in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

In the United States, where the anti-vaxxer movement has found celebrity spokespersons such as Robert F. Kennedy and TV personality Jenny McCarthy, parents choosing not to vaccinate their children over unwarranted health concerns resulted in 2014 in the highest number of measles cases, 667 cases in 27 states, since the disease was declared eliminated in the US in 2000, according to data from the CDC. The majority of those infected were unvaccinated. In 2015, a measles outbreak originating in Disneyland spread to 14 states.

Parents intentionally declining to vaccinate their children have also contributed to the rise in the number of cases of pertussis (whooping cough), which have surged from fewer than 2,000 cases per year in the US in the 1970s and 1980s to more than 48,000 cases in 2012, according to the CDC.

In addition to the fears generated by the anti-science movement against vaccination, preventable diseases like measles are making a comeback in the United States and Europe due to the growth of poverty, austerity measures, and the crumbling of public health infrastructure—processes that will only intensify under the incoming Trump administration.



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