

# Epidemiologist Eric Feigl-Ding calls CDC's mask reversal a "mess"

Benjamin Mateus  
21 May 2021

On May 13, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that it is no longer advising that individuals vaccinated against COVID-19 wear masks indoors or socially distance.

The announcement was condemned by leading US and international epidemiologists, who warned that the proposal would lead to the ending of mask mandates nationwide.

"It's such a mess! So many of us are really upset. It is incredibly frustrating!" said Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding in a telephone interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* on Thursday.

Feigl-Ding is one of hundreds of epidemiologists flabbergasted by the CDC's abandonment of masking mandates, which the White House had touted only a few months ago as vital in controlling the spread of the virus.

Dr. Ding is involved with the COVID Action Group, whose stated mission objective is to save lives through "proactive prevention." He is currently a senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists and the chief health economist for Microclinic International.

He is also a former faculty member and researcher at Harvard Medical School and the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health.

Feigl-Ding's Twitter account on the science of the evolving pandemic has garnered a considerable following and a great deal of respect for his frank observations. He has been a critical voice in raising concerns over the rise of COVID-19 variants, the airborne nature of COVID-19 transmission, and the crucial fact that children have been essential in the community transmission of the coronavirus.

"Inevitably, now state after state and business after business is saying you don't need to wear your masks if you are vaccinated. But everything is on an honor

system," Dr. Feigl-Ding explained. "If you go into a grocery store or a workplace, you don't know if the person not wearing a mask is vaccinated, or they don't believe in wearing masks, or are anti-vaxxers. It is horrible to rely on an honor system. That is inherently the problem! There are still too many of us that are still vulnerable, and there are no vaccine passports or electronic verification processes to determine who is or is not vaccinated."

He continued, "Less than half of the population has received even one dose of the vaccines. Most young people have yet to receive the vaccine, and those under the age of 12 will most likely not see a dose until sometime this fall. Some children are immunocompromised, who rely on real herd immunity to be protected because the vaccines won't work for them. There are just too many people still very vulnerable."

Feigl-Ding noted that after the CDC rescinded its mask guidance, states and corporations quickly rolled back mask guidance for all customers, without any meaningful way to check if they are vaccinated or not.

In response to concerns over asymptomatic infections, he began to explain that "in theory, we know that if you are vaccinated with an mRNA vaccine, your likelihood to become infected is quite small. Generally, with vaccines, asymptomatic effectiveness is usually lower than symptomatic effectiveness."

Feigl-Ding cited the CDC prospective study of 3,950 health care workers, which concluded that effectiveness under natural conditions for those who had received two doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine was 90 percent, meaning that, under the observed conditions, 10 percent could develop an asymptomatic infection.

In a study conducted in Qatar that was published in

the New England Journal of Medicine, after complete vaccination with two doses, the effectiveness was 87 percent for the B.1.1.7 variant, but only 72.1 percent for the B.1.351 variant, the strain first detected in South Africa.

“The vaccines are good at protecting you against severe disease,” Feigl-Ding said. “The likelihood that you will need to be hospitalized is quite small. But what we still don’t have a good handle on is breakthrough infections. These require contact tracing, which is hard to do in super-spreading events. Finding the index patient is not an easy matter.”

Breakthrough infections are those in which the SARS-CoV-2 RNA is detected in a person who has been fully vaccinated. Dr. Feigl-Ding added, “In this sense, we are trying to answer if once A goes to B, does B go to C?” In other words, do infected-vaccinated individuals transmit the virus?

He continued, “The study the CDC published on the Kentucky skilled nursing facility is a case in point. An unvaccinated infected health care personnel was responsible for an outbreak there. I think 25 percent of the residents who were fully vaccinated became infected.”

According to the CDC’s report, 75 out of 83 residents living there had been fully vaccinated. “Did that one unvaccinated person infect everybody, or did it get passed from one person to another? Evidence for this needs to be built up, which is lacking.”

He then described a series of infections that occurred in Singapore among previously vaccinated airport workers, leading the government to impose new restrictions in the city-state. Last week’s New York Times report noted that 46 cases had been traced to the Singapore Changi Airport, the largest of about 10 clusters of new infections. “Some of those infected were among family members of airport workers, who had been vaccinated,” Dr. Feigl-Ding explained.

He then asked, “Did you hear about the recent cluster of infections in Oklahoma? The health department there has identified a cluster of 17 cases associated with the B-16-17 variant (B.1617.2). Three of these were in fully vaccinated people.”

He raised considerable concern over this variant, first detected in India, citing developments in the UK, where it is replacing the B.1.1.7 strain. “We aren’t seeing the numbers yet because they are still buried under the

other infections. But it’s much faster than even the B.1.1.7, about 2.4 times faster than the original virus. But to really understand these dynamics between breakthrough infections, we need more genomic sequencing.”

He went on to say, “But this is what makes the CDC mask guidelines inherently problematic. They may protect you against getting severely ill or the need to be hospitalized. But by carrying it indoors, by bringing it home, you may invariably infect those who are vulnerable.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**