

Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo declares “healthy” children should not receive vaccine in new COVID-19 guidelines

Alex Johnson
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On Monday, Florida’s top medical official Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo and Governor Ron DeSantis unveiled a public health protocol that formally recommends against “healthy” children taking the COVID-19 vaccine, an unprecedented policy that follows the forced reopening of schools and the blocking of critical mitigation measures like mask mandates to stem the tide of pediatric infections.

Just 24 hours later, Florida’s Department of Health issued a document, “Guidance for Pediatric COVID-19 Vaccines,” which made a minor alteration to the original claim. The guidance declares healthy children aged 5 to 17, “may not benefit from receiving the currently available COVID-19 vaccine.”

The new measure is a provocative and unfounded approach that goes far beyond the refusal of state and federal officials to prevent the spread of the virus. DeSantis is taking a further step in introducing the most blatantly unscientific policies. This follows the Biden administration’s total abandonment of any federal response to slow down transmission of the virus and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) recent guidelines that remove recommendations for face coverings and quarantines.

Ladapo made the announcement at a roundtable that assembled some of the most notorious and reactionary opponents of vaccinations, lockdowns, masks and all other measures aimed at containing the spread of the disease which has already killed close to 1 million Americans.

Three of the speakers at the event, Jay Bhattacharya, Sunetra Gupta and Martin Kulldorff are all co-authors of The Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto that has served as a guiding strategy for rejecting scientifically verifiable and evidence-based policies that could end the pandemic and eliminate COVID-19.

The Declaration was written in October of 2020 and argued for the implementation of “herd immunity” as a response to the pandemic, which meant COVID-19 should be allowed to spread naturally without restraints so that masses of people would develop “immunity” to the virus. Despite receiving loud condemnations from world-renowned epidemiologists for its homicidal consequences, the “herd immunity” doctrine was inaugurated in practice by the Trump White House shortly after and has since been embraced by Biden and the entire capitalist class as the only effective means to confront the pandemic.

Kulldorff and Bhattacharya worked closely with DeSantis last year in developing the state’s COVID-19 response plan and joining him in several roundtable discussions on the pandemic. Bhattacharya, a professor of medicine and economics at Stanford University, emerged

as a go-to expert for the far-right governor, providing a pseudoscientific rubber stamp for legislation prohibiting mask requirements in public spaces and schools.

In August of last year, Bhattacharya stood as a witness for the DeSantis administration in a lawsuit brought by parents challenging the governor’s reactionary ban on mask mandates at schools. The tapping of Bhattacharya as an “expert witness” in the state’s argument against masks was even more ludicrous given the fact that he is not an immunologist or epidemiologist. Bhattacharya has claimed that he “studied COVID closely” since the pandemic emerged in early 2020.

Bhattacharya testified that the Delta variant, which was raging throughout Florida and led to soaring numbers of child infections and hospitalizations, was “less deadly but perhaps more transmissible” than the previous variant. “There’s no evidence that the masks...stop the disease [from] spreading,” he declared. He also cited school districts with mask mandates that supposedly fared no better than unmasked districts. Nothing was said of the refusal of the state government to shut down schools in the face of the Delta surge, a measure that would have provided the greatest guarantee against children getting infected.

The participants of Monday’s panel condemned coronavirus lockdowns and state-mandated policies as “failures” and repeated entirely dubious claims surrounding the supposed risks of the vaccine for healthy children compared to the low risk that COVID-19 illness poses to them. Monday’s roundtable was supplemented with additional documents released by the Florida Department of Health Tuesday.

“It is essential for health care practitioners to analyze existing data on the COVID-19 vaccine alongside parents when deciding to vaccinate children,” said the surgeon general. “Based on currently available data, the risks of administering COVID-19 vaccination among healthy children may outweigh the benefits. That is why these decisions should be made on an individual basis, and never mandated.”

Emergency response physician Joseph Fraiman said during the roundtable: “If you have a healthy child, the chances of that child dying are incredibly low, essentially close to zero, if not actually zero.” Epidemiologist Tracy Hoeg declared: “The argument for vaccinating children for the societal benefit is not what it used to be...Especially for healthy children, we don’t know if they’ve benefited from being vaccinated on top of already having infection.”

Ladapo asserted in his Department of Health (DOH) guidance

Tuesday that the decision to vaccinate healthy children “should be made on an individual basis” and children under 16 with no significant underlying health conditions “are at little to no risk of severe illness complications from COVID-19.” The surgeon general also proclaimed via tweet: “when overall risk is low, & there is a higher than anticipated rate of serious adverse events in clinical trials, it is unclear if benefits outweigh the risks,” a repetition of one of the central arguments made in the DOH notice.

The DOH document, however, does not even point to evidence from any clinical trials demonstrating “higher than anticipated serious adverse events” from the vaccine. In fact, the only information presented for this claim is a link to a webpage from the US Food and Drug Administration describing what a serious adverse effect is.

Another reason given by Ladapo for the abandonment of recommending vaccines is the supposed health risks posed for young people. This is pointed out in cases where the mRNA vaccines have been linked to myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle found particularly among young men and teenage boys. However, an adverse reaction to the vaccination, including the possible risk of myocarditis, has been proven to be very rare, according to studies produced from the CDC as well as clinical trials conducted for children aged 5–11 from pharmaceutical maker Pfizer.

The health guidance also lists a “high prevalence of existing immunity among children” which is placed above a subnote that suggests the absence of data on the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination among children with existing immunity should dispel the need for vaccines. Again, not a shred of evidence is provided to support the claim that widespread immunity among children from previous infection has been reached or that vaccinations do not contribute to immunity.

The document also draws attention to a recent MedRxiv study on the effectiveness of the Pfizer vaccine among children 5–11 and 12–17 years, which Ladapo presents as proof showing the reduced efficacy of the vaccines for that age group. While it is true that vaccine effectiveness has waned considerably for children in recent weeks due to the dramatic upsurge caused by the Omicron variant, principal responsibility for this development lies with the actions of the Democrats and Republicans who have opposed any shutdown of schools and businesses, allowing the more infectious variant to spread widely.

Both pro-corporate parties have consciously repudiated all public health measures that would affect economic production so that workers can go back to workplaces pumping out profits for the corporations and Wall Street. Accordingly, children must remain in classrooms during the pandemic so their parents can go work. This inhumane policy has had the consequence of dramatically reducing vaccine effectiveness in school-aged children, because the policy of letting the virus rip through the population has led to the evolution of new variants with more immune-evasive capabilities like Omicron.

As to the claim that COVID-19 poses a limited risk to infected children, this is readily disproven by a review of the most basic statistics which confirm the devastation that the virus has wrought on young people.

According to the most recent data from the CDC’s Demographics Tracker, total pediatric deaths now stand at 1,576, with a staggering 536 lives lost so far this year in a little over two months. Last week, 110 deaths were added, the highest weekly total of the year. Throughout the month of February, children were dying at a rate of 7.5 per day, with 70 percent of these occurring in last 13 days of the

month.

Nearing the peak of the Omicron surge in late December, an average of 334 children 17 and under were admitted per day to hospitals with the coronavirus, a number that grew substantially as more children were being sent into classrooms after winter break concluded, as more than 3,000 people in the US were dying each day from Omicron. By the end of 2021, only about 14 percent of children aged 5 to 11 were fully vaccinated, while the rate for 12 to 17 year olds was about 53 percent, according to CDC data. Those under the age of 5 remain ineligible to be vaccinated.

Scores of public health officials reacted on social media with protests against the propagation of openly fraudulent science from Florida’s top medical authority. Dr. Oni Blackstock, a primary care and HIV physician and former classmate of Ladapo, called the surgeon general’s tweet on Tuesday “misinformation” and challenged the claim that there was a higher rate of “serious adverse events in clinical trials” for children taking the vaccines.

Citing the Pfizer clinical trial, she noted that while local reactions such as swelling or redness had been most common, these were also relatively rare. “2.7% in [the] vaccine arm vs 1.1% in [the] placebo arm with local reactions (redness, swelling, pain at injection site).” Blackstock went on to express immense exasperation at the unscientific notions being pushed by Ladapo. She declared: “That this is a former friend and classmate who is spreading this dangerous disinformation is especially heartbreaking.”

Political and health authorities like Ladapo, DeSantis, and other open proponents of the “herd immunity” doctrine are making efforts to delegitimize vaccinations for children in their attempts to trivialize the deadliness of SARS-CoV-2, which many of them describe as no more harmful than the typical flu. Statistics on pediatric deaths from the flu show that death rates pale in comparison to the hundreds of children that have died from COVID-19 the past two years.

The CDC’s statistics on influenza-associated pediatric deaths show that from 2018 to 2020, there were approximately 339 deaths from the flu during—144 for the 2018–2019 flu season and 195 for 2019–2020. This amounts to less than one-quarter of the children that have died from the coronavirus since March 2020, which also includes elevated numbers of deaths during Delta and Omicron waves.



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