Biden appoints mass infection advocate Ashish Jha as COVID-19 Response Coordinator

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On Thursday morning, the White House published a statement by President Biden announcing that Dr. Ashish Jha will replace Jeff Zients as the White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator.

The selection of Jha, who has served as a de facto pandemic spokesman for the Democratic Party, underscores that the White House will do nothing to stop the pandemic as the Omicron BA.2 subvariant spreads uncontrolled and all federal pandemic resources dry up.

In the statement, Biden summarized why Dr. Jha was chosen, noting that he is "a well-known figure to many Americans from his wise and calming public presence."

Indeed, Jha was chosen because he is a "household name" who over the past two years has been brought onto the broadcast news shows on a near-daily basis to issue soporifics and disarm the population to the immense dangers posed by the pandemic. Anyone who watches the news has endured the complacent nostrums of Dr. Jha in some of his hundreds of appearances that span nearly every corporate media news outlet, including ABC, NBC, CNBC, CNN, MSNBC and more.

The corporate media immediately showered praise on Jha Thursday, while whitewashing the roles played by him and Zients. The *New York Times* characterized Jha as "an outspoken public health expert" and claimed that he "has urged an aggressive approach to the pandemic." This lie was echoed by *The Hill*, which said that Jha " has called for aggressive responses" throughout the pandemic.

In reality, Dr. Jha embodies the worst forms of petty-bourgeois careerism, smugness and duplicity. He is the leading representative of a milieu of right-wing, corrupt scientists who have parroted the line of the Democratic Party since Biden took office. These include Drs. Monica Gandhi, Leana Wen, and Vinay Prasad, as well as economist and school reopening advocate Emily Oster, a colleague of Jha's at Brown University who receives funding from the Koch-affiliated Mercatus Center.

These figures are to public health what Martha Raddatz, Richard Engel and their ilk are to US foreign policy. Given their script and talking points, they will say anything as long as their wealth and careers are maintained.

Regarding Dr. Jha's supposed "wisdom," a brief review of his positions and predictions throughout the pandemic reveal this as a lie cut from whole cloth. From the beginning, he has consistently misled the public and upheld the interests of the corporations and financial elite.

On August 13, 2020, the *Boston Globe* published an article titled "Harvard pandemic expert Ashish Jha takes a more optimistic view of the fall and winter." They quoted Dr. Jha as saying, "maybe by November, December into January we start getting a vaccine. Some people start getting vaccinated, and life starts turning around for a bit better—not normal—but then we can get through the winter without too much suffering." Over the next six months, 334,573 Americans died from COVID-19.

On November 2, 2020, as the first winter surge was well underway and before anyone had been vaccinated, Dr. Jha told *Education Week*, "There's no doubt in my mind that schools need to be bolder than they're being." Ignoring the mass COVID-19 outbreaks that had already taken place in schools, he added callously, "Obviously, if going back to in-person education was going to lead to a lot of infections and deaths, you'd say OK, that's a cost we can't bear. But districts that are being too cautious are doing enormous harm to children and families in their communities."

Ever since then, Dr. Jha has consistently advocated for the unsafe reopening of schools, ignoring the fact that nearly 13 million children have officially been infected with COVID-19, and over 1,600 have died from the disease. In doing so, Jha cynically invokes his own children's return to school, omitting the fact that he lives in wealthy Newton, Massachusetts, where the median income is nearly double the US average. The school district boasts a 12:1 student-teacher ratio, far below the average in most US public schools, and has funded a gamut of mitigation measures denied to children in most schools.

On March 12, 2021, Jha appeared on the *Times*' "The Ezra Klein Show" and opposed the relinquishing of intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines, falsely claiming that mRNA vaccines would be too complicated to produce in less developed countries. He neglected to mention that he is a senior

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advisor at Albright Stonebridge, a firm that represents pharmaceutical monopolies Pfizer and Merck on issues surrounding intellectual property rights.

On March 19, 2021, as COVID-19 cases were rising across Europe, Dr. Jha stated on NBC News, “We’re not going to have another Europe on our hands. We’re not going to have a fourth surge.” Shortly thereafter, on April 7, 2021, Jha co-wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* with Monica Gandhi, in which they claimed, “There is no doubt that vaccines will help bring an end to the acute, emergency phase of this pandemic and usher us into endemicity, which is when covid-19 would be like any other respiratory infection that we could live with.”

Within weeks, the CDC told vaccinated people they could stop wearing masks, setting the stage for the surge of the Delta variant last summer. Dr. Jha explained his “mistake” by saying that he did not expect so many people to refuse to get vaccinated, despite numerous polls indicating that this would happen.

On July 22, 2021, when the surge of the Delta variant was well underway, Dr. Jha stated on CNBC, “We don’t need a federal mask mandate, and we certainly don’t need a federal lockdown.” He added, “We’re seeing little bumps of cases in places like Vermont and Massachusetts that have high vaccination rates. They’re fine, their hospitals are fine, they’re not likely to get overwhelmed.” Within months, the Delta surge pushed hospitals throughout the Northeast to their capacity.

During the disastrous Omicron surge, in which nearly 30 million Americans have officially been infected with COVID-19 and over 167,000 have died, rumors began circulating that Zients would step down from his position, prompting the milieu of right-wing scientists to begin auditioning for the role.

In its article on Jha’s appointment, the *Post* noted that he “had increasingly become an adviser to the White House in recent months, with officials praising him for his pragmatism and ability to speak to a variety of audiences.”

On January 17, 2022, a day when over 800,000 Americans were infected with COVID-19 and 1,397 died from the disease, Jha appeared on CNBC and spouted off a potpourri of talking points then emanating from the White House, stating, “I’m hoping Omicron gives us the lessons we need to manage the rest of this pandemic, however long it lasts, and move to a *new normal*, where we treat this virus much more as an *endemic thing*. And so I’m hoping that this really is the *transition variant* that gets us into a different footing for future variants and lets us manage them much more effectively” (emphasis added).

Most recently, when the CDC unscientifically changed its masking guidelines last month, Dr. Jha was at the ready to pen an effusive op-ed in the *Times*, headlined, “We’ve Entered a New Phase of the Pandemic. It’s Time for New Metrics.” He praised the move as “a welcome change” which was “reasonable, well-timed and consistent with the science.” The op-ed was published before the guidelines were even released, underscoring the clear coordination between Jha and the White House.

While Drs. Jha, Gandhi, Wen, Prasad and others maintain a pretense of separation from the far-right “herd immunity” advocates like Drs. Jay Bhattacharya, Martin Kulldorff and Scott Atlas, their differences are entirely superficial and terminological, with the former substituting “endemic” for the latter’s “herd immunity.” As took place more broadly with the political establishment, during the surge of the Omicron variant these two unscientific camps de facto joined forces to promote the lifting of all mitigation measures.

Jha is taking the helm of the COVID Response Team at a highly precarious moment of the pandemic, and he will now bear primary responsibility for the deepening catastrophe as the official death toll surpasses 1 million in the coming days. Zients, the multimillionaire financier who has allowed nearly 550,000 Americans to die from COVID-19 during the first year of the Biden administration’s disastrous pandemic response, will retreat to his palatial estate.

Federal funding for the pandemic has completely dried up. Supplies for testing, vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, antivirals, variant surveillance, and vaccine research and development will all evaporate in the coming weeks and months. The White House and Democrats try to blame Senate Republicans, covering up the fact that Biden and Zients have refused to invoke the Defense Production Act, a pattern that Jha will certainly follow.

All of this takes place amid the growing spread of the Omicron BA.2 subvariant, which is more contagious, immune-evasive and virulent than the BA.1 subvariant. BA.2 has been shown to reinfect people within weeks of a BA.1 infection and is causing surges across Europe in countries that just experienced major BA.1 surges.

As infections, hospitalizations and deaths begin to mount from BA.2 and whatever variant comes next, the surest prediction is that Dr. Jha will do nothing but issue empty platitudes to try to “calm” an increasingly radicalized American working class.

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