

Florida Governor DeSantis convenes anti-vaccine panel

The state government will set up an oversight committee to attack public health measures adopted by federal agencies like the FDA and CDC.

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The fascistic governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, and his quack surgeon general, Dr. Joseph Ladapo, held an anti-vaccine live-streamed roundtable discussion last week where they announced that they would take aggressive actions to hold the federal government and Big Pharma “accountable” for the handful of cardiac-related deaths and adverse events supposedly associated with the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines.

The evidence amassed over more than two years and billions of doses of vaccines has proven they are not only effective in preventing severe disease and death, but they are also some of the safest available treatments, with even fewer complications than the rare events associated with many other vaccines. Studies have shown that coronavirus infections have, regardless of age, caused infinitely more harm than the vaccines administered to protect against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

It is precisely the unscientific and biased nature of how the data is cherry-picked by DeSantis and the ultra-right forces for which he speaks, to further their political agenda—and the impending DeSantis 2024 presidential campaign—that is extremely troubling and dangerous, not only for public health, but for its far-reaching impact on education, health delivery and every other social program and service.

DeSantis intends to form a Public Health Integrity Committee to oversee the medical establishment and assess recommendations and guidance related to public health and health care, which means that in the current and future pandemics, such measures will be subordinated to the diktats of the fascist right. This is an open declaration to businesses that public health in Florida will always remain hostage to financial interests.

DeSantis and company are also planning to move a bill through the state legislature in the upcoming legislative session that “protects physicians’ first amendment rights and their right to dissent from orthodoxy and the establishment.” The governor declared, “A pediatrician should be able to say you don’t need to be wearing a mask without fear of reprisal from the higher ups who are bent on imposing it on people.”

One could then ask, doesn’t this also protect a pediatrician, who claims a patient does not need a vaccine or any other treatment that evidence-based medicine has deemed appropriate, or one who prescribes treatment that contradicts reality and science?

Where does it stop? And how does a doctor-patient discussion on such evidence merit First Amendment consideration, at the expense of the Hippocratic Oath and the patient’s right to receive the best medically appropriate treatment? A doctor’s right to publicly voice his or her opinion on a subject is another matter and is already protected by the First

Amendment. But if doctors offer improper recommendations to their patients because of ideological bias or bigotry, then the sanction of medical malpractice charges is called for.

The motion being advanced in Florida on the First Amendment is far more sinister. The anti-vaccine movement which DeSantis has been courting is based on an anti-scientific perspective hostile to public health. It rejects the understanding of health as a deeply social issue, in which individual health is inseparably connected to community health.

Myocarditis and right-wing pseudo-scientific quackery

DeSantis and his hand-picked doctors seek to generate and exploit popular fears by exaggerating the scale and nature of adverse events supposedly linked to COVID-19 vaccines, particularly myocarditis (inflammation of the heart) and pericarditis (inflammation of a sac-like structure surrounding the heart).

These are medical terms referring to patients presenting with chest pain, palpitations or shortness of breath. A diagnosis for the condition requires some combination of blood tests, electrocardiogram, chest x-rays, ultrasound of the heart or even on occasion a biopsy.

Such events are rare occurrences with the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines that tend to afflict younger male adults more commonly than another age group or gender. They occur within seven days of a second dose of the vaccines. However, rather than contextualizing these findings on a broad-based objective analysis of the data that include the benefits as stated to the saving of lives, Ladapo and his medical colleagues have promoted conspiracy theories and anecdotes to influence their audience.

In an opinion piece published in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2022, Ladapo reported on a case-series study of 77 people in Florida who died within 28 days of their vaccination since the vaccination campaign had been initiated in December 2020. The study concluded that “COVID-19 vaccination was associated with a modestly increased risk for cardiac-related mortality 28 days following vaccination.”

Given the tens of millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines given and that the 77 deaths were identified based on death certificate reports and not medical records, and that their COVID-19 status was unknown, no definite conclusions can be drawn as to the cause of their deaths. In fact, those conducting the study admitted as much, writing, “This study cannot

determine the causative nature of participant's death. We used death certificate and not medical records. COVID testing status was unknown for those who did not die of/with COVID. Cardiac-related deaths were ascertained if an ACME code of 13-152 were on their death certificate, thus, the underlying cause of death may not be cardiac-related."

One should add, the timing of these deaths and the vaccinations may well have been coincidental. Case-series are the lowest form of evidence, lacking a comparison group and the relationship between COVID-19 exposure, vaccination and health outcome is often unclear.

As a Harvard Medical School graduate and UCLA researcher appointed surgeon general of Florida, Ladapo has used his credentials to further the policy of herd immunity, learning to "live with the virus" at whatever cost. His column in the *Journal* attempts to provide a scientific-sounding cover for what is merely a prejudice, with anecdotes standing in for the type of evidence based on large-scale objective studies.

A recent benefit-risk assessment for males ages 18 to 64 was conducted by the Office of Biostatistics and Pharmacovigilance at the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER), a division of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in Silver Spring, Maryland. Using estimates for vaccine effectiveness against the Omicron strain against cases and hospitalization, CBER found that vaccinating one million 18- to 25-year-old males would prevent 82,484 COVID-19 cases, 4,766 hospitalizations, 1,144 ICU admissions and 51 deaths from COVID-19. By comparison among the one million vaccinations, there were 128 vaccine-attributable myocarditis/pericarditis cases, 110 hospitalizations, zero ICU admissions and zero deaths.

The CDC's data indicates the figure for the vaccine-associated rate of myocarditis is around five per 100,000. Yet, *the rate of myocarditis infection associated with COVID-19 itself is 400 in 100,000 or 80 times higher.*

In a letter to the *Journal*, Dr. Kathryn Adams from San Diego, California, with more than 20 years of experience, responded to Ladapo: "After reading his article, I looked more deeply into the medical literature. Dr. Ladapo's Florida Department of Health study included 77 patients. Size does matter in medical studies. A study in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly report* published in April 2022 included 15,214,718 persons stratified by age. In all age groups, there was a higher risk of myocarditis after SARS-COVID-19 infection than after vaccination." [Emphasis by author of letter]

It bears recounting the statistics on adverse events of interest: Anaphylaxis after COVID-19 vaccination, a severe allergic reaction that leads to respiratory arrest, is around five per one million vaccine doses administered. The rate of blood clot disorders after Janssen vaccines is approximately four per one million. No increased risk was found for Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare disorder where the body's immune system damages nerve cells, for the mRNA vaccines.

The Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), maintained by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the CDC, is a repository for reports of any negative occurrences for people receiving vaccinations. VAERS has listed 17,868 preliminary reports of death among people who received COVID-19 vaccines out of 657 million doses over two years.

This data is unverified and unchecked scientifically, the equivalent of tips phoned in to a hot line, providing alerts to follow up, not to draw conclusions from itself. As the CDC warns, "Reports of adverse events to VAERS following vaccination, including deaths, do not necessarily mean that a vaccine caused a health problem."

More than just from the CDC, the safety, quality and efficacy of the vaccines have been validated by numerous independent international studies and agencies that include the World Health Organization and European CDC. There is a remarkable congruity of the data on these questions.

Is Florida a COVID-19 "success story"?

Much of DeSantis' political standing rests on his claim that his policies of early reopening of schools and businesses and vehement opposition to lockdowns and mandates for both masks and vaccination have made it possible for the Florida economy to grow more rapidly than other states while avoiding huge losses from the pandemic. This is a gross distortion.

By official case counts, Florida, with a population of 21.5 million, ranks third in both population and in COVID-19 deaths, with 83,000 Floridians succumbing to the pandemic. On a per capita basis, Florida ranks ninth for COVID-19 cases and thirteenth for COVID-19 deaths, significantly worse than the national average. The Delta wave in the summer of 2021 killed over 20,000 Floridians, and during the Omicron phase of the pandemic, 20,000 more died.

Florida ranks 22nd among the 50 states with 69.07 percent of the population having completed their vaccination series. But when it comes to providing boosters to its population 65 and older, the state ranks only 39th, with 60 percent of having received additional jabs. Of those between 18 and 64, only 27 percent have received a booster, placing the state in 34th place.

Given the governor's criminal inaction on the pandemic and obstruction on any measure to protect the population that includes vaccine mandates and masks in schools, the roundtable anti-vaccine event could be seen as political vaudeville. However, DeSantis's political stunt is the deepening of the reactionary rightward shift that has been the hallmark of US politics in the last half-century, and it is gaining momentum with the COVID-19 pandemic. It marks the beginning of a political witch-hunt.

DeSantis told the panel, "Today, I'm announcing a petition with the Supreme Court of Florida to empanel a statewide grand jury to investigate any and all wrongdoing in Florida with respect to COVID-19 vaccines. We anticipate we will get approval for that ... that will be something that will be empaneled most likely in the Tampa Bay area and that will come with legal processes that will be able to get more information and to bring legal accountability for those who committed misconduct."

Ladapo, in his concluding remarks, said, "people are beholden to the CDC. Who [else] are you going to refer to [for information]? CDC said this, but it doesn't make sense and 'what am I going to do?' I am not CDC." He then noted, "We have created now a group here of scientific experts broadly in the subject of clinical medicine, epidemiology, immunology, evolutionary biology, biostatistics, and vaccine science. We will be issuing recommendations that make sense and are scientifically valid. And we will be the only organization in the country doing that."

The supposed experts include those who have authored/endorsed the Great Barrington Declaration, an unscientific free market manifesto declaring that mass infection of the population is a positive good: Jay Bhattacharya (Stanford University) and Martin Kuldorff (Harvard Medical School and formerly of the FDA).

They stood with Trump in demanding schools and universities be opened back in 2020 and allow young and healthy people to contribute to the herd immunity that would "ultimately benefit all." Both had called the lockdowns that saved hundreds of thousands of lives "the worst assault on the working class in half a century."

Bhattacharya, professor of health policy at UCSF, in his opening remarks at the panel discussion, made the claim that had their voices not been suppressed and censored at the beginning of the pandemic, then the lockdowns could have been avoided.

He declared: "The centrally important issue that caused the problem is that we silenced people from expressing their thinking—qualified people

for expressing their thinking—as a result, the decision making at the top of the country was absolutely abysmal. When you have censorship, the kinds of suppression of voices, essentially a *social credit system*, demeaning people who disagree with the CDC or whatever, you are going to get bad decisions that don't get checked. We have to discuss that as well as a large number of pandemic decisions that harmed the lives of a tremendous number of people, with the vaccine mandates and many other things ... not in Florida so much."

The claims of censorship and persecution were made at a public forum sponsored by one of the most powerful politicians in the country, the governor of the third largest state and likely presidential candidate, and voiced by well paid professors at some of the most prestigious universities in America, including Harvard, Princeton and the University of California. The views said to be suppressed are rabidly hailed in the pages of the right-wing press and are in practice indistinguishable from those being implemented by the Biden administration.

Others on the panel included Tracy Beth Høeg (University of California San Francisco), Dr. Joseph Fraiman, Christine Stabell Benn (University of Copenhagen), Bret Weinstein (Princeton University), and Steven Templeton (Indiana University School of Medicine). Weinstein has promoted the Wuhan lab leak theory and described the evidence of the origin of the virus in nature as "fairy tales."

Tracy Høeg, an epidemiologist, was on the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Partnership with the far-right parent group Open Schools USA (OSUSA). She has been calling for unmasking children and not spending to improve ventilation of school buildings. In the Florida panel, she was once again peddling her discredited study that the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines were causing more hospitalizations among adolescents than COVID-19 itself. Her study methodology has been cited as flawed, with many of the cases having possibly been due to infection or other causes.

The *BMJ* (*British Medical Journal*) noted that the "study has been widely criticized for mining data from an inappropriate source to deliver an antivaccine message, despite warnings against such data uses." The retrospective study that used VAERS data claimed that the rate of hospitalization for myocarditis among adolescent boys who received a second dose of Pfizer's COVID mRNA vaccine was four times higher (166 cases versus 44 cases per million) than after infection.

Professor Trish Greenhalgh at University of Oxford explained that VAERS data base is "a passive monitoring system" prone to "reporting and recall bias." She said, "The CDC explicitly states that VAERS cannot be used in isolation to infer the existence, frequency, or rates of vaccine complications. VAERS data dredging, as it is known, has been used by antivaccine groups in the past to produce alarmist estimates of harms from vaccines."

DeSantis concluded, with offering his gratitude to the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration. "If it wasn't for them with Great Barrington and states like Florida that were pushing back, we would have ended up doing like China where you have these rolling lockdowns. That's what they wanted [referring to Biden and Fauci]. That is absolutely what they wanted to do in the United States if it wasn't for people pushing back despite of all the problems we have had, and we would have been in a much worse shape as a country."

This is the essential distortion of the attack on Biden from the right rather than from the left. DeSantis and other fascistic politicians denounce even the limited and largely discarded mitigation measures against COVID-19 as totalitarian, while they push ahead with genuinely dictatorial methods of rule, as demonstrated in action by Trump's mob attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

DeSantis is seeking to capitalize on the mass suffering and pain that have left so many confused and bewildered and redirect them into fascistic channels. In other words, an anti-working class campaign is well under

way to sow division and mistrust through misinformation and bald-faced lies.

Whatever their conflicts among themselves, however, in class terms, Trump, Biden and DeSantis all stand in the same trench defending the interests of Wall Street, undermining and ultimately obliterating the basic tenets of public health in the response to the pandemic at the cost of more than one million working class American lives.



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