

We Want Them Infected: The integration of pseudoscience into the US pandemic response

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30 October 2023

We Want Them Infected, by Dr. Jonathan Howard, is a significant stand against efforts to rewrite the history of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote the deadly pseudoscience of the anti-vaccine movement. The book opens with the titular quotation from Dr. Paul Alexander, who was an official in the US Department of Health and Human Services during the Trump administration:

Infants, kids, teens, young people, young adults, middle aged with no conditions etc. have zero to little risk... so we use them to develop herd... we want them infected...

This call for the mass infection of the population was in July 2020, just a few months into the ongoing pandemic that has now killed over 1.2 million people in the US and caused an estimated 27 million excess deaths worldwide.

As an individual, Dr. Alexander is a fascist zealot who later went on Alex Jones' *Infowars* to rant about how vaccines have tainted the blood supply and call for the public execution of any health officials and politicians who promoted vaccines or infection control measures, all while hawking his own miracle cures. But his call for mass infection was part of a broader attack on public health embraced by a layer of doctors and scientists at leading research institutions, as well as government officials and media personalities across the globe.

The intentional infection of children as government policy was articulated by Sweden's State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell as early as March 13, 2020. It was then picked up by *New York Times* commentator Thomas Friedman, who praised Sweden's approach, writing, "Is this cure [of lockdowns]—even for a short while—worse than the disease?" This phrase—"the cure can't be worse than the disease"—was immediately seized upon by Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India and other fascist figures.

The pseudoscientific justification for herd immunity through mass infection was later given its clearest formulation in the Great Barrington Declaration from October 2020, and it is here that Dr. Howard focuses his book.

The central thrust of the Declaration was that people under 65 were unlikely to die from COVID-19, and if they would just live their lives normally and get infected, then the pandemic would end in three to six months as people gained immunity through infection. The organizers of the Declaration went on to found the Brownstone Institute as a think tank to pursue the attack on public health. Howard refers to the collection of doctors and researchers in the broader orbit of the Brownstone Institute as "contrarian doctors."

The main authors of this manifesto of death, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Dr. Martin Kulldorff of Harvard, Dr. Sunetra Gupta of Oxford and their colleagues emerged as a center of

disinformation, quite willing to lie and falsify research to support their goal of undermining basic public health measures.

Howard writes:

Doctors and scientists from our most prestigious universities convinced millions of Americans that COVID was only dangerous for the elderly and infirm. They influenced powerful politicians, who also wanted the virus to spread widely. While overwhelmed frontline doctors begged the public to avoid the virus, other doctors, completely sheltered from the consequences of their words, worked to undermine these efforts.

In reality, the effects that COVID-19 continues to have on children is grim. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) figures, over 200,000 children in the US have been hospitalized by COVID-19, with a tragic 2,320 dying to date, making it by far the deadliest infectious disease affecting children.

Beyond the acute phase of the disease, children can be affected with a variety of long-term impacts. Up to a quarter of children experience lingering Long COVID symptoms four weeks or more after initial infection. One recent study showed that infants infected with COVID-19 are several times more likely to develop type 1 diabetes. Ultimately, the biggest refutation of the Declaration's "focused protection" pseudoscience is that more than 200,000 children in the US and over 10 million globally have lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID.

This book traces how from the very beginning of the pandemic the figures around the Declaration were not simply mistaken, but wrong in ways that cannot be arrived at through honest science. To give just one of Dr. Howard's many examples, the Great Barrington Declaration claimed:

If the virus is like other coronaviruses in its immune response, recovery from infection will provide lasting protection against reinfection, either complete immunity or protection that makes a severe reinfection less likely.

One year later, after the beginning of the Omicron wave had blown away efforts to obscure reinfections, Dr. Gupta claimed the exact opposite:

One thing we have always known, because there are other coronaviruses circulating, is that we lose our immunity against the infection very rapidly, whether the virus changes or not.

This would be the recurring pattern for contrarian doctors, either avoiding or lying about their prior statements that proved wrong. On point after point, the estimated number of deaths, the danger to children, the threshold for “herd immunity,” the risks from new variants, and more, this network of doctors was repeatedly and loudly wrong.

Dr. Howard approaches the matter with meticulous citations and attention to detail that come from his experience struggling against the anti-vaccine movement and writing for the website *Science Based Medicine* years before the onset of the pandemic.

In chapter 7, Howard devotes 25 pages to direct quotations from contrarian doctors predicting the imminent end of the pandemic, starting in March 2020 until he wrote the book in December 2022. He limits himself to simply appending the official death count at the time each prediction was made. Watching these merchants of death proclaim that the worst of the pandemic is over as wave after wave drives the toll from a couple hundred to over a million deaths is a simple but irrefutable demonstration of how detached from reality these contrarian doctors are.

Because of their willingness to say anything as long as it opposed public health measures, these doctors were brought on as advisers to far-right politicians and constantly interviewed in newspapers, magazines, on podcasts and television.

Bhattacharya and Kulldorff were in regular contact with the Trump administration, and their colleague at the Hoover Institute, Scott Atlas, became Trump’s key adviser on COVID. Bhattacharya went on to advise Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’s attack on public health measures. DeSantis appointed another signatory to the Great Barrington Declaration Joseph Ladapo, a Harvard-educated former UCLA professor and anti-vaccine fanatic, to head the state’s health department. Dr. Gupta advised then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and is specifically credited with rolling back public health measures in the face of that country’s second wave.

Dr. Howard, an associate professor at NYU Langone Health and the Chief of Neurology at Bellevue Hospital, had a very different experience with the pandemic than these right-wing ideologues. When New York was overwhelmed during the initial surge, Dr. Howard volunteered to work in the COVID ward. Part of chapter two describes the horrifying struggle of healthcare workers against a novel virus:

Hospital workers also heard the nonstop “code blue” pager, summoning the airway team to yet another room. I would often arrive in the morning to learn that half of the people I left the night before had died or been transferred to the ICU.... The youngest person I saw die was a 23-year-old man with no underlying conditions. He was able to breathe when I first met him, but was completely obtunded, unable to speak or move. Several days before his death, I made him suffer by clumsily placing a nasogastric tube so he could be fed. We didn’t know he would die, and he needed nutrition. I still think about that a lot.

While healthcare workers fought tooth and nail to save lives and workers demanded health and safety measures, these contrarian doctors demanded an end to masking, opposed vaccines, and encouraged mass infection.

The final chapter of *We Want Them Infected* is one of the most damning. Taking up a full third of the book, it covers 27 false arguments used by these doctors against COVID-19 vaccination. For each one, Howard begins by quoting the exact same reasoning used by antivaccine cranks before the pandemic. The direct connection is striking.

In “Should We Let Children Catch Omicron?” from February 2022, Vinay Prasad, an Oncologist at UC San Francisco and author for the

Brownstone Institute, and Allison Krug argue the “benefits” of infecting children with COVID:

What kids really need, however, is a return to normal. And when it comes to infectious disease, normality means a world where they are routinely exposed to, and overcome, viral illness. For children, getting sick and recovering is part of a natural and healthy life.... Parents must consider that exposures are how we best protect our children against the variants of the future. In fact, it is reckless to let children age into a more serious encounter with a disease best dealt with while younger.

In comparison, this is how Dr. Suzanne Humphries, a longstanding anti-vaccine homeopath, described measles in June 2013:

Today, half a century after measles vaccines have become commonplace, and two to three generations beyond the expectation of contracting measles during childhood as a regular event, measles is now thought of as a potentially deadly disease with no redeeming qualities. However, a look into the medical literature of the past shows us that wild measles may indeed have afforded immunologic advantages to those infected.

We Want Them Infected demonstrates in relentless fashion that the arguments used by the Great Barrington Declaration and contrarian doctors in favor of “natural immunity” through infection are not new, they are simply lifted from the anti-vaccine movement.

A real strength of Dr. Howard’s writing is his mastery of the technical information and familiarity with the rhetorical techniques anti-vaccine activists use to evade the scientific issues. He amply demonstrates that the doctors in question are betraying the basic principles of the field.

Within the scope set by Dr. Howard, however, there remain significant gaps when he touches on the political forces pushing these ideas. He deals briefly with Jeffrey Tucker, the Libertarian advocate of child labor who, as editorial director of the far-right American Institute for Economic Research, coordinated the Great Barrington Declaration and Brownstone Institute. He further shows the connections of various contrarian doctors to Republican politicians, but does not include the significant promotion of these figures by the Democratic Party and pseudo-left forces.

Jacobin magazine, the unofficial organ of the Democratic Socialists of America, gave a glowing interview to Dr. Kulldorff in September 2020. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) held a town hall featuring Dr. Bhattacharya and other Brownstone writers to promote the reopening of schools without mitigations.

Multimillionaire AFT president and member of the Democratic National Committee, Randi Weingarten, also declared the pandemic over just before the disastrous Omicron wave while promoting the pro-infection Dr. Lucy McBride. In a brief passage that Dr. Howard does not develop, he quotes Dr. Bhattacharya as celebrating that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) finally adopted the position of the Great Barrington Declaration in August 2022.

With the emergence of the Omicron variant at the end of 2021, broad sections of the capitalist political establishment and media embraced large portions of the Great Barrington Declaration, falsely declaring the new variant “mild” and a “live virus vaccination.” David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* wrote, “COVID increasingly resembles the kind of health risk that people accept every day.”

Noted opponent of high life expectancy Ezekiel Emanuel went on a

media blitz with former Biden advisers Drs. Michael Osterholm and Céline Gounder, calling for an end to counting COVID deaths and “recognizing that SARS-CoV-2 is but one of several circulating respiratory viruses.” New York City’s Democratic Mayor Eric Adams declared, “It’s time to open up and feed our ecosystem, our financial ecosystem.”

The embrace of “herd immunity” talking points went all the way to the top of the Biden administration, where Dr. Ashish Jha was appointed the White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator. Jha was most famous for supporting in-person schooling long before pediatric vaccinations were available and for opposing mask mandates.

On January 17, 2022, a day when over 800,000 Americans were infected with COVID-19 and 1,397 died from the disease, he told CNBC, “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.”

That same month, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky declared, “The overwhelming number of deaths, over 75 percent, occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities, so really these are people who are unwell to begin with, and yes, really encouraging news in the context of Omicron.” The Chief Medical Advisor to the President, Anthony Fauci, carried that message to the World Economic Forum, stating, “It is an open question as to whether or not Omicron is going to be the live virus vaccination that everyone is hoping for.”

These ghoulish comments promoting mass infection as a way out of the pandemic at the acceptable cost of those who were already “unwell” fit comfortably with the contortions of the contrarian doctors.

Ultimately, Howard leaves unanswered the question lurking behind the book: “Why as the pandemic progressed, did so many prominent doctors at leading institutions, some with very respectable published research, embrace long debunked, anti-science positions?”

Many of the Declaration’s positions were clearly false from the start, and as more and more people died, and their claims required erasing the harsh reality of the past four years, their policies were increasingly adopted by governments across the world. The Dr. Fauci from before the pandemic would scarcely believe that he would go on to tell the BBC in an interview in August 2023 that “the vulnerable will fall by the wayside.”

Leon Trotsky, no stranger to efforts to falsify history, wrote in his biography of Stalin:

There must first be a demand for a lie. It must serve definite social interests. These interests must objectively be rooted in the needs of the day. Only then can the lie become a historical factor.

From the beginning of the pandemic, business interests recoiled from the impact and cost of public health measures to control the pandemic. Describing the Great Barrington Declaration shortly after it was written, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

The eight-paragraph declaration cites no scientific data and does not seriously attempt to argue its case. It is, rather, a series of assertions constructed retroactively from the demand by US big business to abandon public health measures to contain the pandemic.

Sections of the better-off middle class, doctors who do not see patients, podcasters, art dealers, insulated by remote work and better access to

health care, compared the sacrifices required by basic public health measures to their personal risk of death, and recoiled in disgust.

Since the first smallpox vaccinations were invented hundreds of years ago, there have been anti-science campaigners and scam artists who have opposed them, including credentialed doctors, but the anti-vaccine movement remained decidedly on the fringe of medicine. With the COVID-19 pandemic, this pseudo-science provided a ready-made framework for sections of the disoriented middle class to align themselves with a much broader attack on public health measures by both big business parties.

One striking example of this is how strongly Robert F. Kennedy Jr. features in the book. Dr. Howard was writing before Kennedy announced his campaign for president, but he regularly uses Kennedy’s anti-vaccine and anti-science positions as a benchmark while refuting contrarian doctors.

Kennedy’s anti-science lies and anti-Semitic remarks had long kept him out of “polite society,” but he is now promoted as a serious politician by such diverse commentators as neo-Nazi Nick Fuentes and Socialist Alternative’s Briahna Joy Grey. Kennedy’s anti-vaccine non-profit Children’s Health Defense saw its funding skyrocket from just over \$2 million a year in 2019 to \$15.7 million in 2021.

The conclusion to *We Want Them Infected* includes recognition of the book’s limits. Dr. Howard points out many other forms of pandemic misinformation, from ivermectin to anti-masking, which he does not cover. It also raises, in passing, healthy criticism of the official response to the pandemic. He castigates the World Health Organization (WHO) for denying the airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and the Biden administration for “officially surrender[ing] to the virus.” After noting that 700,000 Americans had died since Biden took office, he dryly quotes NFL head coach Bill Parcells’ comment, “You are what your record says you are.”

As COVID-19 remains a leading cause of death, it is critical for workers to know the genuine history of the pandemic and where the conceptions being used to justify an end to public health measures come from. *We Want Them Infected* provides an excellent resource for understanding how contrarian doctors have repackaged old lies for a new disease.



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