

# Kennedy's purge of ACIP vaccine panel signals deepening attack on public health

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On Tuesday, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. launched an unprecedented assault on US public health institutions and evidence-based science with his purge of 17 Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) members.

Kennedy justified this attack on science in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece, falsely alleging “persistent conflicts of interest” and claiming ACIP had become a “rubber stamp for any vaccine” that “never recommended against a vaccine—even those later withdrawn for safety reasons.” These charges constitute political libel against public health professionals, contradicted by overwhelming evidence.

Kennedy cited a 2009 Office of Inspector General report asserting that “97% of the people on ACIP had conflicts,” but NPR investigations and former committee members have exposed this as a lie. Tom Frieden, former CDC director, called Kennedy’s claims “absolutely false,” explaining the report identified clerical errors—not substantive conflicts of interest.

The 2009 audit reviewed ethics paperwork for 17 CDC advisory committees, finding that while 97 percent of disclosure forms contained errors or omissions, these were primarily administrative misfilings rather than ethical breaches. Only seven of 246 advisory committee members across all committees were found to have improperly voted on restricted matters. The report did not single out ACIP, nor did it find pervasive wrongdoing.

Former ACIP members describe rigorous ethics processes requiring disclosure of financial ties and often relinquishing of professional affiliations. Carol Baker, former ACIP chair, exemplified this commitment by stepping down from developing a vaccine she helped invent, stating that “serving the public mattered more.”

Kennedy’s insistence that pharmaceutical involvement invalidates vaccine safety represents a calculated effort to erode public trust. His demand for randomized controlled

trials for every vaccine—despite ethical constraints against withholding proven interventions—manufactures doubt under the guise of scientific rigor. Vaccine development and approval depend on a robust mix of evidence, including RCTs, observational studies and post-marketing surveillance.

The evidence supporting vaccination has always been and remains overwhelming. In the US alone, childhood vaccinations for those born between 1994 and 2023 prevented 1.1 million deaths, 32 million hospitalizations and over 500 million illnesses, saving nearly \$3.7 trillion in societal costs. COVID-19 vaccines saved 20 million lives globally in 2021 and averted trillions in economic losses.

Kennedy’s pledge to “reconstitute” the ACIP is widely seen as a bid to install ideologically aligned appointees like David Geier—an indicted fraudster whom Kennedy has already selected to review autism-vaccine links.

Kennedy’s recommendations to Trump to appoint Jay Bhattacharya as NIH director and Marty Makary as FDA commissioner underscore his intent to reshape public health leadership around ideological loyalty rather than scientific merit. Last week, both appeared alongside Kennedy announcing a COVID-19 vaccine recommendation overhaul, symbolizing their alignment with his anti-vaccine agenda.

Bhattacharya, a Stanford economist who never completed clinical residency, promotes false equivalence between scientific consensus and misinformation. As co-author of the discredited Great Barrington Declaration, he advocated dangerous herd immunity strategies starting in 2020—a position widely condemned by the scientific community. NIH staff describe him as “out of his depth” and note his promotion of the thoroughly debunked Wuhan Lab Lie conspiracy theory.

Makary, a Johns Hopkins surgeon appointed to “course-correct” the FDA, has attacked CDC data as riddled with

false positives and derided the ACIP as a “kangaroo court.” His insistence that only randomized controlled trials validate vaccine safety ignores the necessity of observational studies and real-world data for populations typically excluded from initial trials.

Their joint push to rescind COVID-19 vaccine guidance for healthy children and pregnant women—despite strong evidence of continued benefit and ongoing viral risks—reflects a wholesale abandonment of principled public health frameworks. Together, they co-founded the *Journal of the Academy of Public Health*, criticized for lacking peer review and publishing every submission regardless of quality—a propaganda vehicle masquerading as legitimate science.

These developments reflect a coordinated campaign by conservative think tanks and wealthy donors to reshape academia and public health policy. Journalist Walker Bragman’s report *The Invisible Hand* reveals how wealthy backers use figures like Bhattacharya to launder fringe ideologies through respected institutions, ultimately undermining science and promoting corporate agendas. Bhattacharya’s ties to the Brownstone Institute and COVID denial networks exemplify this strategy.

The damage to scientific research has been immediate and severe. Since Bhattacharya’s appointment, NIH terminated 2,100 research grants totaling \$9.5 billion and canceled \$2.6 billion in contracts, halting crucial work on cancer, mental health and maternal care. Under Kennedy’s watch, more than 20,000 HHS employees have been fired or pushed into early retirement, creating a massive brain drain in these vital institutions.

Kennedy’s dehumanizing rhetoric around autism further reveals his agenda’s ideological nature. His references to autistic individuals as a “burden” or example of preventable disease echo disturbing eugenics-era concepts. Plans for a national autism registry and redirected research funds intensify these concerns.

Resistance has begun to emerge within the scientific community. At Bhattacharya’s first NIH town hall last month, dozens of employees walked out after he promoted the Wuhan Lab Lie and previewed deep funding cuts. More significantly, over 300 NIH staff and alumni have signed the Bethesda Declaration released Sunday—a direct rebuttal to the policies imposed by Bhattacharya and Kennedy, titled in a deliberate reference to the Great Barrington Declaration.

The signatories accuse leadership of endangering participants, abandoning scientific commitments and silencing dissent. Many went public despite retaliation

risks, defending scientific integrity against authoritarian assault.

Kennedy’s fraudulent appeal to when “the world sought guidance from America’s health regulators” masks a regressive agenda aimed at dismantling the modern vaccine schedule, eviscerating decades of scientific progress. This rollback would prove catastrophic, as the US is already witnessing massive spikes in measles and whooping cough.

Modeling studies warn that plummeting vaccination rates could return diseases like polio and measles to epidemic levels, causing millions of preventable deaths. Kennedy’s unilateral removal of COVID-19 vaccine recommendations for healthy children and pregnant women—without consulting the ACIP—represents an authoritarian bypass of expert oversight that public health officials describe as eroding trust and democratic accountability.

Defending science-based public health policy is inseparable from defending democracy. These developments are part of a larger war on science, public health and democratic governance itself, and take place against the backdrop of Trump’s unfolding coup d’état. The fight against fascist dictatorship in all its manifestations, including Kennedy’s ruthless war on science and public health, requires the building of a revolutionary socialist movement in the working class.

To preserve public health, science and a democratic society, the scientific community must align itself with the working class in a broader political struggle against the capitalist system that subordinates human health to corporate profit.



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