

# Kennedy appoints vaccine skeptics and anti-science zealots after purge of immunization advisory panel

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12 June 2025

In a move that has drawn widespread condemnation from the scientific and medical communities, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. abruptly dismissed all 17 members of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) independent Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) on Monday. He swiftly replaced them with eight new appointees—many of whom are known for their criticism of vaccines and for promoting misinformation.

This sweeping overhaul has raised alarm among public health experts, who warn that the nation's vaccine policy infrastructure is now under direct attack. Kennedy appears to be acting with breakneck speed to consolidate control and institutionalize his public health agenda before meaningful resistance can be mounted against what many are calling a scientific counter-revolution.

Kennedy announced the dismissal of the ACIP members in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published on June 9, 2025, with formal termination notices sent by email approximately two hours later. The abrupt move caught even members of Congress off guard, many of whom learned about it only after the fact. Justifying the purge, Kennedy claimed the committee was “plagued with persistent conflicts of interest” and had become “little more than a rubber stamp for any vaccine.”

He concluded his op-ed with a sweeping promise: “In the 1960s, the world sought guidance from America's health regulators, who had a reputation for integrity, scientific impartiality and zealous defense of patient welfare. Public trust has since collapsed, but we will earn it back.”

But beneath the rhetoric lies a radical repudiation of the very foundation of modern public health. Framed as a restoration, Kennedy's vision is in fact a dismantling of decades of life-saving vaccination programs—the cornerstone of infectious disease prevention in the 20th and 21st centuries. This repudiation of public health principles, cloaked in populist language, threatens to result in catastrophic consequences, including preventable illness and mass death.

Former CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden (2009–2017) forcefully rejected Kennedy's interpretation of a 2009 report from the Office of Inspector General for HHS, calling it “a total misrepresentation” and “classic misinformation.” The report, which Kennedy cited to justify his ACIP purge, primarily identified administrative shortcomings—namely paperwork errors and omissions in financial disclosure forms—across all 17 CDC advisory committees. It did not uncover widespread or serious conflicts of interest. In fact, only 7 out of 246 committee members were found to have voted on matters from which they should have recused themselves, representing just 3 percent of cases.

Public health experts stress that ACIP members are thoroughly vetted, required to disclose potential conflicts, and routinely recuse themselves from votes when appropriate. Moreover, they argue that past affiliations with the pharmaceutical industry—when transparently disclosed—can offer

valuable expertise rather than compromise. Kennedy's framing, they warn, distorts a system designed to balance scientific rigor with transparency, in service of a narrative that undermines public trust in vaccines and health governance.

The mass firings—carried out without consultation and just weeks before ACIP's scheduled June 25-27 meeting—bypassed the CDC's standard procedures for appointing committee members. The abrupt action drew swift condemnation. Dr. Richard Besser, former acting director of the CDC, warned that it “should erase any remaining doubt that [Kennedy] intends to impose his personal anti-vaccine agenda on the American people.”

On June 11, 2025, Kennedy announced the appointment of eight new ACIP members, describing them as “highly credentialed scientists, leading public health experts, and some of America's most accomplished physicians,” committed to “evidence-based medicine, gold-standard science, and common sense.” However, none of these appointees was vetted by an independent expert panel or any scientific body. Many have publicly expressed vaccine skepticism or opposition to established public health practices, raising serious concerns about the erosion of scientific rigor, the marginalization of experienced vaccine experts, and a further breakdown in public trust.

Epidemiologist Dr. Martin Kulldorff, one of the eight newly appointed ACIP members, is best known as a co-author of the controversial Great Barrington Declaration (2020)—a document widely condemned by the public health community and characterized by some experts as a “manifesto of death.” The declaration advocated achieving “herd immunity” through widespread natural infection while supposedly shielding vulnerable populations—an approach that was swiftly denounced as “unethical,” “scientifically and ethically problematic,” and “total nonsense” by organizations including the World Health Organization and leading public health experts like Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Kulldorff has consistently opposed core COVID-19 mitigation strategies, including lockdowns, mask mandates, contact tracing, and vaccine requirements, despite strong evidence that these measures saved lives and protected public health. In 2024, he was dismissed from his position at Harvard University, a move he attributes to his vocal criticism of vaccine mandates.

He currently serves as senior scientific director at the Brownstone Institute, a right-wing think tank established to challenge COVID-19 public health interventions. He also co-founded the *Journal of the Academy of Public Health* (JAPH), which has come under scrutiny for its unorthodox editorial practices—such as guaranteeing publication for member-submitted articles. Critics argue that JAPH functions as a parallel publication structure for content that would likely not withstand peer review in mainstream scientific journals, warning that it may be used to

legitimize pseudoscientific ideas and sow doubt about established scientific consensus.

Physician and biochemist Dr. Robert Malone has emerged as a central figure in the anti-vaccine movement. He frequently promotes himself as the inventor of mRNA vaccine technology, a claim disputed by numerous colleagues who acknowledge his early involvement in the field but emphasize that his contributions were limited and do not merit sole credit.

Malone gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting conspiracy theories and disinformation about vaccines and public health measures. He has claimed, without evidence, that millions of Americans were “hypnotized” into receiving COVID-19 vaccines and has advanced the false narrative that these vaccines can cause a form of AIDS. In addition, he has downplayed the severity of measles outbreaks and advocated unproven treatments for both measles and COVID-19.

His repeated dissemination of false claims led to a permanent suspension from Twitter in December 2021 for violating the platform’s COVID-19 misinformation policy. For many public health experts, Malone’s appointment to the ACIP stands in stark contradiction to Kennedy’s stated commitment to ‘evidence-based’ science and has further exposed the wrecking ball that is the administration’s vaccine oversight.

The appointment of Vicky Pebsworth, a regional director for the National Association of Catholic Nurses, is also troubling. Pebsworth also serves as a board member and volunteer director for the National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC), an organization widely criticized by public health experts as a major source of vaccine misinformation and fearmongering.

Pebsworth has publicly aligned herself with discredited anti-vaccine figures, including British fraudster Andrew Wakefield, and has described herself as the mother of a “child injured by his 15-month well-baby shots in 1998.” She has also declared that coercing adults or children to take what she refers to as “experimental vaccines” is “unethical and unlawful.”

Her presence on ACIP is viewed by many as “incredibly problematic” because it gives a prominent voice and voting power to an individual affiliated with a group that actively undermines public trust in vaccination. Critics warn that placing a NVIC leader at the center of national vaccine policy threatens to legitimize misinformation under the guise of scientific deliberation.

Dr. Retsef Levi, a professor of operations management at MIT, has become a favored figure within the anti-vaccine movement due to his public denunciations of mRNA vaccines. In a 2023 social media post, he claimed that the vaccines “cause serious harm including death, especially among young people,” and called for their immediate suspension. Levi also co-authored a widely discredited paper with Florida Surgeon General Dr. Joseph Ladapo, which attempted to link Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine to increased cardiovascular deaths. The study has been rejected by public health authorities and regulatory agencies for its methodological flaws and lack of support from real-world data gathered from billions of doses administered globally.

Dr. Cody Meissner, a pediatric infectious disease specialist and former member of both ACIP and the FDA’s vaccine advisory panel, is arguably the most experienced in vaccine policy among the new appointees. He has publicly affirmed that measles vaccines are “very safe and highly effective,” but has opposed COVID-19 vaccine mandates for children. During the pandemic, he also co-authored an opinion piece with FDA Commissioner Marty Makary criticizing school mask requirements for children.

Other new appointees include Dr. Joseph Hibbeln, a psychiatrist and nutritional neuroscientist formerly affiliated with the NIH; Dr. James Pagano, a retired emergency medicine physician with limited published work on vaccines; and Dr. Michael Ross, an OB-GYN whose current academic affiliations could not be independently verified. The collective lack of immunization-specific expertise among many of these appointees

has heightened concerns about the scientific credibility and future direction of ACIP under Kennedy’s leadership.

Kennedy’s restructuring of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) is viewed by public health experts as a direct threat to evidence-based medicine and the integrity of the U.S. vaccine infrastructure. By removing credentialed experts with decades of experience in immunization science and replacing them with individuals who either lack technical qualifications or espouse anti-vaccine views, Kennedy has effectively dismantled a pillar of U.S. public health oversight.

ACIP plays a central role in shaping national vaccine policy: its recommendations inform CDC guidance, influence insurance coverage, and serve as critical decision-making tools for pediatricians, obstetricians, and primary care providers. Kennedy’s unilateral actions—including his recent rescission of COVID-19 vaccine recommendations for healthy children and pregnant women without consulting ACIP—represent a break from the standard deliberative process and a troubling shift toward top-down political interference.

These changes come amid rising outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and whooping cough, prompting warnings from public health officials that declining trust and reduced vaccine uptake could result in the re-emergence of diseases once nearly eradicated in the U.S.

Moreover, this upheaval extends beyond ACIP. The mass firings of career staff across HHS, CDC, and NIH, alongside Kennedy’s efforts to suppress scientific communication, such as proposing to bar federally funded researchers from publishing in leading medical journals like *The Lancet*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, which he has labeled “corrupt,” are being described by scientists as a full-scale assault on science and public health within the Trump administration.

The consequences of this restructuring are potentially far-reaching, eroding institutional trust, increasing susceptibility to vaccine-preventable diseases, and establishing a precedent for political interference in scientific advisory processes.



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