

Kennedy's Vaccine Advisers Sow Doubts as Scientists Protest U.S. Pivot on Shots

ACIP's plans to review the government's childhood vaccine schedule could undermine long-accepted consensus and public confidence, vaccine advocates fear.

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As fired and retired scientists rallied outside in the Atlanta heat, an advisory panel that Robert F. Kennedy Jr. handpicked to replace experts he'd fired earlier met inside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's headquarters to plan a more skeptical vaccine future.

The new members of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices began their tenure Wednesday by shifting the posture of the 60-year-old panel from support for vaccine advancement to doubt about the safety and efficacy of well-established and widely administered inoculations.

Their discussions and votes this week paled in significance, however, in comparison with Health and Human Services Secretary Kennedy's announcement Tuesday that he would withdraw a \$1.2 billion U.S. commitment to global immunization.

That decision will kill children in the world's poorest countries, critics said.

The new ACIP, meanwhile, recommended that newborn Americans get a newly licensed shot to protect them against a respiratory virus. The panel also urged doctors to stop administering influenza vaccine that contains a mercury-based preservative called thimerosal. That decision, in keeping with Kennedy's disproven claim that thimerosal helped cause an autism epidemic, will have relatively little effect, since only about 4% of flu vaccines currently contain the preservative.

More worrying to vaccine advocates, the committee's plans to review the government's childhood vaccine schedule could undermine long-accepted consensus and public confidence, since at least three of the seven committee members have been outspoken opponents of current vaccines. The federal government is legally bound by ACIP's decisions to provide vaccines it recommends to lower-income children and other groups, and states also follow ACIP's advice.

Former Harvard University epidemiologist Martin Kulldorff, ACIP's new chair, set the tone in his opening remarks. "Secretary Kennedy has given this committee a clear mandate to use evidence-

based medicine when making vaccination recommendations, and that's what we will do," he said.

He added, "There are no wrong questions," and he announced that a new working group would investigate whether children and adolescents are getting too many vaccines. Another will consider whether to continue ACIP's 34-year-old recommendation of a birth dose of hepatitis B vaccine, a practice that has [dramatically reduced liver disease](#).

Kulldorff, a COVID-19 contrarian and biostatistician who said he was fired by Harvard for refusing a COVID vaccination after suffering a severe case of the disease, said the reputations of science and public health have fallen to all-time lows. But scientists and public health officials disagree on who's to blame.

The biggest cause is "fearmongering and pseudoscience that has overtaken our country," Caroline Brown, a pediatrician outside Winston-Salem, North Carolina, said during the remote public comment session. She noted that her state's first measles case of the year was reported this week, panicking many of the families she treats.

Measles was declared eliminated in the United States 25 years ago. It "is back now because of declining rates of vaccination fueled by misinformation that is not only allowed but amplified by some of you sitting on this very committee," Brown said.

The American Academy of Pediatrics declined to send official liaisons to the meeting and announced on Thursday that it would continue to publish "its own evidence-based recommendations and schedules" for vaccines, blasting Kennedy's panel.

"What we heard in this meeting was really a false narrative that the current vaccine policies are flawed and that they need fixing," Sean O'Leary, a physician who chairs the AAP Committee on Infectious Diseases, said in a statement. "That's completely false. These policies have saved millions of lives, trillions of dollars."

The CDC's immunization safety office has conducted studies of the entire vaccine schedule and found no harms, although a 2023 study indicated a possible link between aluminum salts used in some shots and asthma.

Within the CDC conference room, there was a striking contrast between ACIP members and the CDC officials who briefed the panel. While the CDC scientists presented studies showing the safety and value of COVID and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) vaccines, for example, many of the panel members expressed skepticism.

Biochemist Robert Malone and Massachusetts Institute of Technology management professor Retsef Levi — two panelists who have called for banning the mRNA technology used for COVID vaccines — were frequently dismissive of the CDC analysis and data.

Malone, Levi, and Vicky Pebsworth — a longtime foe of school vaccination requirements — suggested hidden harms such as "hot lots" of dangerous shots, residual spike protein in the blood

from mRNA shots, and inadequate vaccine safety monitoring.

CDC scientists rebutted most of the critiques. But final recommendations on policy will be made by the committee.

Standing along a busy suburban thoroughfare outside the CDC's headquarters in Atlanta as the meeting rolled on, people critical of the new ACIP were dressed in costumes representing vaccine-preventable diseases — measles, HPV, chickenpox. A small cadre carried balloon letters spelling "R-E-S-T-O-R-E A-C-I-P." One held a leg splint, commonly used to stabilize the limbs of people with polio, a disease driven to near-extinction by vaccination. Many drivers honked in support as they drove by.

Casey Boudreau, who recently retired from a career working on vaccine-preventable diseases at the CDC, said she was upset by Kennedy's insistence that the verdict was still out on the safety of some vaccines and by his calls for them to be studied further.

"You're focusing on reinventing the wheel," she said. "Do we need to go back and test air bags again? Or do we know they work?"

Tony Fiore, who served as a liaison to ACIP during some of his time at the CDC before retiring, said he was "greatly concerned" that the committee's words and actions would "reduce the confidence people have in vaccines and hurt our immunization programs."

HHS spokesperson Andrew Nixon, who hovered briefly at the edge of rally as people began to gather, dismissed it as "nothing more than a dog and pony show with a lack of serious credibility, evidenced by their Halloween costumes," in a statement later sent by text message.

At the meeting inside, Kennedy and his agenda loomed in the background, especially after the HHS secretary announced the abandonment of Gavi, an international group that estimates its vaccine programs [have saved 18 million lives](#), mostly in the world's poorest countries.

The United States has provided [13% of Gavi's budget](#), and President Joe Biden had promised an additional \$1.2 billion over four years before he left office. Kennedy's action means that children "will miss lifesaving vaccines" against diseases causing pneumonia, diarrhea, measles, polio, and other diseases, former CDC official Deblina Datta said in an interview.

"There will be deaths," said Datta, who retired in 2023 after 24 years at the agency. "I am not being hyperbolic. This is a big blow for children worldwide."

Kennedy said Gavi had not done enough to promote vaccine safety. He also accused the group of complicity in censoring vaccine skeptics like him during the pandemic.

Before Kennedy intervened, the ACIP had been preparing to propose giving children one less shot. The committee was to have voted on reducing vaccinations against HPV, which causes cervical cancer, from two doses to one — because a single shot has proved so effective.

Kennedy has earned hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees from a pending lawsuit against Merck over alleged injuries from one of the HPV vaccines.

While it will have little actual impact, the vote on thimerosal also frustrated vaccine proponents. Public health agencies removed the substance from nearly all childhood vaccines beginning in 1999, out of concern that the accumulation of even tiny amounts of mercury could harm children's brains and, some believed, cause autism.

Removal of thimerosal from childhood vaccines had no impact on autism rates, however.

But on Thursday, one of the earliest anti-thimerosal activists, nurse Lyn Redwood, presented a paper to ACIP on its dangers. Her arguments were nearly identical to [a paper she co-wrote](#) on the subject in 2001.

A [summary of the evidence](#) on thimerosal produced by CDC staff was posted online next to [Redwood's slides](#) on Tuesday, but it was removed before the ACIP meeting began. The CDC paper concluded the evidence did not link thimerosal in vaccines to autism or other developmental issues.

According to The Washington Post, [Kennedy has appointed Redwood](#) to a position in the CDC's immunization safety office.

"Removing thimerosal from vaccines didn't make them safer, just more expensive," Elias Kass, a naturopathic physician in Seattle, told the committee during a public comment session. "Re-litigation of questions already answered, like the safety of thimerosal, is not advancing radical transparency — it is an insidious attempt to suggest that something was missed or hidden previously."

Removal of thimerosal from all flu vaccines may have drawbacks.

Two companies — Seqirus and Sanofi — still sell multi-dose flu vaccine vials that contain thimerosal as a preservative. A single vaccination from these 10-dose vials costs 10 to 40 times less than a single-shot prepackaged syringe, [according to a CDC price list](#).

Seqirus will have no trouble replacing its remaining multi-dose vials with single syringes in time for the flu season, spokesperson Melanie Kerin said.

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