

Trump nominates vicious opponent of public health Jay Bhattacharya to head the NIH

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President-elect Donald Trump nominated the reactionary opponent of public health Jay Bhattacharya as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on Wednesday. The position reports to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, for which Trump nominated the anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. two weeks ago. The NIH is the federal government's largest research agency with a budget of \$47 billion.

Bhattacharya's appointment is a clear signal that the ruling class aims to demolish the last remnants of public health still standing after five years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Bhattacharya, an economist and professor of health policy at Stanford University, is a notorious promulgator of pseudoscientific positions on the COVID-19 pandemic. He is best known as the co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD), which the *World Socialist Web Site* aptly characterized as a "manifesto of death" when it was published in October 2020.

Bhattacharya and RFK Jr. are bookends in a string of Trump nominations of fringe anti-science hacks to head America's top public health agencies, which were once the world's preeminent such institutions. Each one of these nominations has been made not in spite of, but because of their hostility to public health and social services.

After RFK Jr., Trump nominated mega-millionaire television personality Dr. Mehmet Oz to head the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). Oz is famous for promoting herbs and supplements that do not provide the health benefits he claims.

Last Friday, Trump nominated three political allies with dubious experience and pseudo-scientific track records to other major health agencies. They include former Florida Representative Dave Weldon as

administrator of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Marty Makary as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and Fox News television doctor Janette Nesheiwat as surgeon general. All three have spread vaccine misinformation and opposed gender-affirming care for transgender individuals.

But no one has spread as much pandemic misinformation as RFK Jr. and Bhattacharya. In a 2021 report published by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, RFK Jr. was listed among the "Disinformation Dozen," 12 individuals who collectively bore responsibility for roughly 65 percent of all anti-vaccine disinformation on social media.

Bhattacharya's GBD promulgated the antiscientific notion of "herd immunity" in service of the profits of Wall Street. The NIH director at the time, Francis Collins, wrote in an email that the authors of the GBD were "fringe," and the NIH should move quickly to publish a fact-based response to debunk it. The GBD was also widely denounced by numerous public health experts and scientists.

Recently, Bhattacharya doubled down on "herd immunity" in an attack on the *World Socialist Web Site*. He claimed that Sweden's early lifting of lockdowns resulted in better outcomes than Norway, where strict lockdowns were in place far longer. The WSWS thoroughly debunked this claim, showing that Norway had far fewer deaths per capita up to the point where it lifted lockdowns and also adopted "herd immunity."

Bhattacharya holds numerous other fringe pseudoscientific positions on the pandemic. He has advocated for ending COVID-19 vaccine mandates, opening schools prematurely and lifting mask mandates. He also promoted the Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory of the origins of the pandemic.

Bhattacharya even opposed vaccinating children against COVID-19, saying “children just don’t die at very high rates.” This is despite the fact that over 1,900 children have died from COVID-19 in the US alone per official data. This number is certainly an undercount, with the real toll likely over 5,000. Worldwide, as of December 2023 over 17,000 children were officially killed by COVID-19, a figure that is undoubtedly far higher.

Furthermore, Bhattacharya ignores the fact that vaccines also mitigate other adverse outcomes in children besides death, especially Long COVID. A study in February estimated that 6 million children in the US are living with Long COVID, a significant fraction of which could have been avoided or lessened in severity with higher vaccination rates.

His advocacy for these anti-public health policies is bought and paid for by billionaires. The American Institute for Economic Research (AIER) hosted the conference that finalized and promoted the GBD at its headquarters in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

AIER is a libertarian think tank funded in the past by the notorious right-wing billionaire Charles Koch. Its ongoing revenues are derived from its own investment advisory firm, American Investment Services, Inc., whose holdings were recently estimated at nearly \$600 million.

Furthermore, as reported by Exposed by CMD in the spring, Bhattacharya won the 2024 Bradley Prize from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. This foundation has a decades-long history of funding right-wing causes and has greater expenditures than the Koch and Scaife foundations combined. One of its board members was reportedly on the phone call Trump made in 2020 to pressure Georgia’s secretary of state to “find the votes” needed for him to win the state’s electoral votes.

When Bhattacharya’s name first surfaced as a possibility for NIH director earlier this month, no Democrats went on record opposing it, and none have expressed opposition since his nomination was confirmed on Tuesday. The silence of the entire Democratic Party in response to his nomination betokens their consent.

Indeed, the nomination of Bhattacharya is the logical outcome of anti-public health policies of the Biden administration, which *de facto* adopted the “herd

immunity” policy in response to the emergence of the highly infectious and vaccine-resistant Omicron in late November 2021. Over the course of 2022, this morphed into the “forever COVID” policy of abject surrender to the virus, with the steady dismantling of all pandemic surveillance and mitigation measures.

The trade unions have also been complicit in the ruling class policy of unending mass infection, debilitation and death implicitly advocated by the GBD. Randi Weingarten, the head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), demanded schools fully reopen two months prior to the Omicron wave, hosting a town hall meeting with Bhattacharya in September 2021 in order to justify the lifting of all mitigation measures.

The silence of the Democrats and praise of the far right for Bhattacharya’s nomination stand in stark contrast to numerous principled and courageous scientists, who have condemned his nomination.

Should Trump’s reactionary public health nominees win confirmation or be forced through using his unconstitutional “recess appointments” scheme, the final destruction of public health in the United States will ensue, with immense global ramifications. The international working class will bear the brunt of their policies, including mass disability and death from COVID-19, as well as the resurgence of long dormant pathogens like measles and polio, and looming threats like H5N1 bird flu.

The Trump administration’s deepening assault on public health and the conditions of the working class more broadly will provoke enormous opposition. This must be channeled behind an independent political program that aims to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. Only through such a struggle can workers and scientists join forces to end the current pandemic and prevent future ones.



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