

Shots

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NIH scientists call on director to protect biomedical research

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Rob Stein

3-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



Hundreds of NIH scientists protested cuts to the research agency in a declaration addressed to NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya.

Alex Wong/Getty Images

Hundreds of scientists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) issued a call for action they dubbed the [Bethesda Declaration](#) on Monday to push back against cutbacks and changes at the biomedical research agency.

Organizers say more than 340 staffers on the NIH's sprawling campus in Bethesda, Md., just outside Washington, D.C., sent the document to NIH Director

Jay Bhattacharya appealing to him to protect the agency. They say the Trump administration is putting politics ahead of academic freedom.



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Before taking over at the NIH, Bhattacharya was known for helping write the controversial Great Barrington Declaration, which questioned lockdowns and other public health measures early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Bethesda Declaration, the scientists say the Trump administration has "forced NIH, under [Bhattacharya's] watch" to "politicize" research, "stigmatize" studies about health disparities, and cut research into COVID-19, long COVID, the health impacts of climate change, and medical issues related to gender and intersex people among other important areas.

"For staff across the National Institutes of Health (NIH), we dissent to administration policies that undermine the NIH mission, waste public resources, and harm the health of Americans and people across the globe," the declaration says. "The life-and-death nature of our work demands that changes be thoughtful and vetted. We are compelled to speak up when our leadership prioritizes political momentum over human safety and faithful stewardship of public resources."

The document is notable because most NIH employees are afraid to publicly criticize the new administration publicly for fear of losing their jobs or their funding — a situation the declaration calls a "culture of fear and suppression." The document was signed by 92 employees who revealed their names.

"Standing up in this way is a risk, but I am much more worried about the risks of not speaking up," said a statement by Jenna Norton, one of the lead organizers of the declaration and a program officer at the National Institute for Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. "If we don't speak up, we allow continued harm to research participants and public health in America and across the globe. If we don't speak up, we allow our government to curtail free speech, a fundamental American value."

In a written response, Bhattacharya said the Bethesda Declaration "has some fundamental misconceptions about the policy directions the NIH has taken in recent months, including the continuing support of the NIH for international collaboration. Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the NIH to succeed."

But some of the scientists who signed the letter described a sense of despair and anguish at the NIH, which is the world's largest public funder of biomedical research.

"It's a horror show. We're under attack in every way all the time," says Sarah Kobrin, who has worked at the National Cancer Institute for more than 21 years. "We're told we're worthless. We're told we're cheats. This is probably the most stressful period of my entire life. It's a thousand cuts, a thousand cuts. They're breaking things that won't be repairable."

Kobrin, chief of NCI's Health Systems and Interventions Research Branch, stresses that she was speaking on her own behalf and not as part of the NIH.

"This is an extinction-level event for biomedical research and global public health, and it's just wrong not to say something and not to try to right this ship," says Ian Morgan, a postdoctoral fellow at the National Institute of Genomic Medicine.

More than 40 scientists from outside the NIH, including 21 Nobel laureates, also initially signed a separate letter supporting the Bethesda Declaration. In addition, more than 500 signed the letter Monday morning after the document was made public.

"We commend the NIH staff who have come forward with the 'Bethesda Declaration' to share concerns in the spirit of academic freedom, for the good of all," the letter states.

"We urge NIH and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) leadership to work with NIH staff to return the NIH to its mission and to abandon the strategy of using NIH as a tool for achieving political goals unrelated to that mission."

Former NIH researcher Jeremy Berg, who ran the National Institute of General Medical Sciences from 2003 to 2011, praises the scientists behind the Bethesda Declaration. "I think they've touched on a lot of important points," he says. "And I think they're very brave to stand up for themselves and for many many many of their colleagues at NIH and for themselves and for the entire country."

Berg, who signed the open letter supporting the Bethesda Declaration, stresses that he's speaking on behalf of himself and not the University of Pittsburgh, where he now works.

"Horror show doesn't even come close actually" to describing the situation," Berg said. "It's tremendously damaging to the United States' ability to do research, the U.S. economy, our competitive position in the world."

Both documents were released one day before Bhattacharya is scheduled to testify before Congress about the NIH's budget. The Trump administration has proposed slashing the NIH budget by nearly 40% to \$27.5 billion from \$44.5 billion.

nih research science funding

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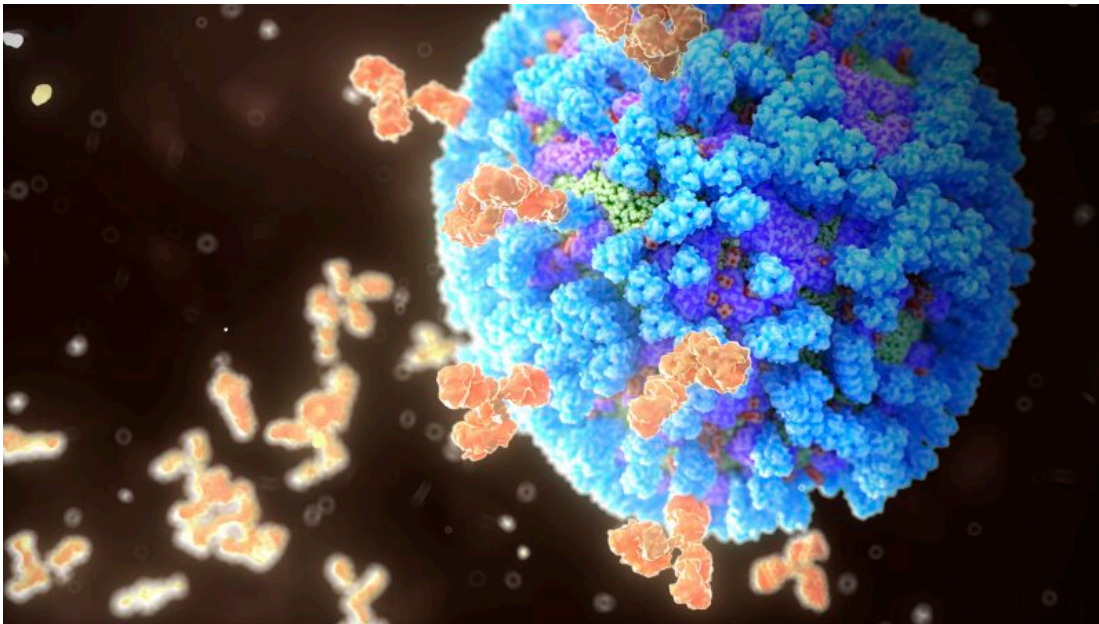
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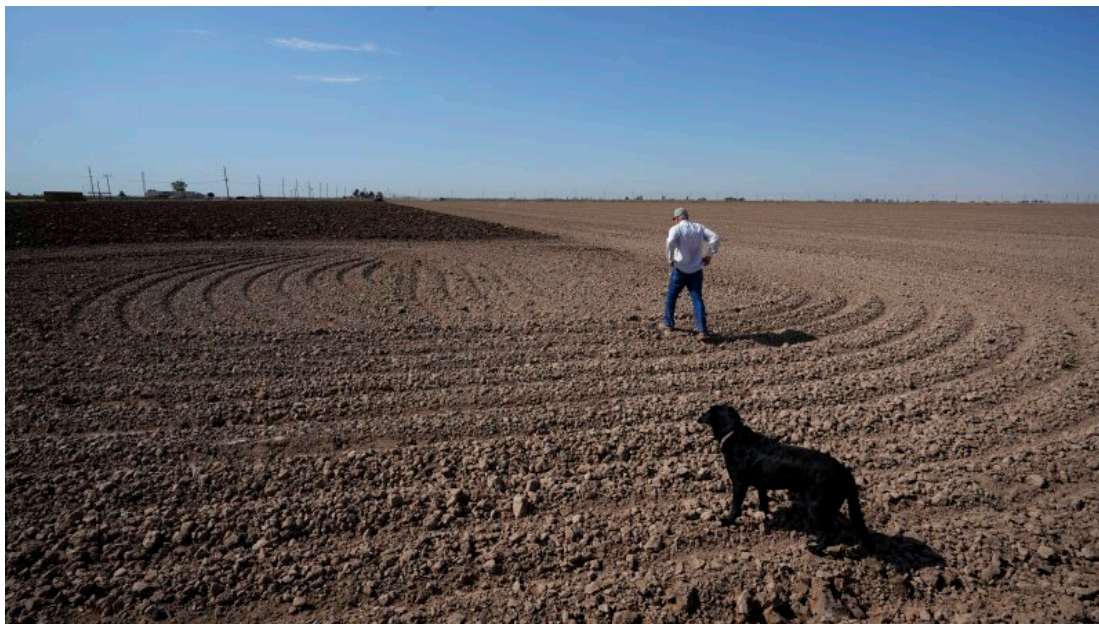
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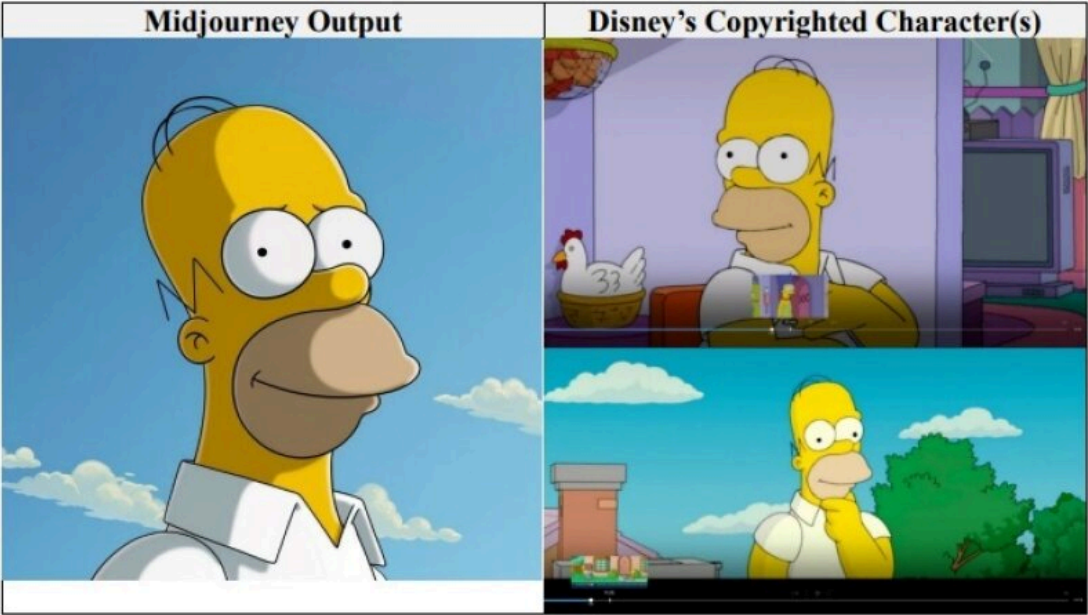
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