


N.I.H. Workers Denounce Trump's 'Harmful' Health Policies

In a scathing public letter, employees of the National Institutes of Health accused the administration of undermining the agency's work and endangering people's health.

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By Benjamin Mueller

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More than 60 employees of the National Institutes of Health signed their names to a scathing letter sent on Monday to denounce what they described as the degradation of the country's medical research apparatus under President Trump, accusing the administration of illegally withholding money, endangering participants in studies and censoring critical research.

The letter, sent to Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, the N.I.H. director, and then posted online, was a remarkable rebuke of the agency's leadership. In interviews, signatories to the letter said that they were concerned they could be fired for speaking out, but that the risks of acquiescing to orders they saw as unethical — and in some cases illegal — were too great.

"We dissent to administration policies that undermine the N.I.H. mission, waste public resources, and harm the health of Americans and people across the globe," they wrote in the four-page letter. "Many have raised these concerns to N.I.H. leadership, yet we remain pressured to implement harmful measures."

The letter included signatories from across the agency's 27 institutes and centers. Its organizers called it "The Bethesda Declaration," a reference both to the home of the agency's headquarters and to a 2020 missive by Dr. Bhattacharya, the Great Barrington Declaration, opposing Covid lockdowns in 2020. In that letter, he and his co-authors argued for dispensing with the lockdowns in the interest of letting the virus spread among younger, healthier people.

Dr. Bhattacharya, who was then an economist and professor of medicine at Stanford University, has described feeling bruised by heavy criticism of the idea, including from N.I.H. officials. After he was nominated to lead the agency, he promised to "establish a culture of respect for free speech in science and scientific dissent at the N.I.H."

With the letter, some of his employees are putting that promise to the test. "We hope you will welcome this dissent," they wrote.

In a statement on Monday morning, Dr. Bhattacharya said that he did.

"The Bethesda Declaration has some fundamental misconceptions about the policy directions the N.I.H. has taken in recent months, including the continuing support of the N.I.H. for international collaboration," he said. "Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the N.I.H. to succeed."

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The letter enumerated Trump administration actions that it said had jeopardized the agency's status as the premier global funder of medical research. On Tuesday, Dr. Bhattacharya is scheduled to appear before a Senate appropriations subcommittee to answer questions about the administration's proposal to shrink the N.I.H. budget by \$18 billion, a reduction of almost 40 percent.

The agency has already abruptly ended more than 1,300 grant awards and delayed sending funding to more than 1,000 additional projects, a recent analysis by The New York Times found. The letter said those actions had been undertaken on the basis of ideological preferences and without scientific staff input, effectively censoring research on issues like health disparities, Covid, the health effects of climate change and sexual health.

Halting clinical trials midstream would endanger participants who had agreed to take medicines or have medical devices implanted, the letter said. In other cases, it said, the Trump administration has cut American scientists off from collaborators abroad and redirected funding from independently vetted projects to unscreened projects "to cater to political whims."

In addition to the dozens of current employees who signed their names, the letter was also signed by about 20 N.I.H. employees who had recently been fired as part of sweeping cuts across health agencies. Hundreds of other current and former N.I.H. workers also joined, but did not disclose their names.

Jenna Norton, who oversees research on disparities in kidney disease at the agency's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, helped organize the letter.

"What we're being asked to do at the N.I.H., as N.I.H. employees, is very clearly unethical and most likely illegal," she said in an interview, citing the agency's legal obligation to distribute congressionally allocated funding.

Speaking in her personal capacity, and not on behalf of her N.I.H. institute, Dr. Norton said she and her colleagues feared "being complicit in these atrocious and harmful things that are harming research participants who've made this generous gift to help other people be healthy."

Separately, scientists outside the federal government organized a letter of support for N.I.H. employees on Monday.

Benjamin Mueller reports on health and medicine. He was previously a U.K. correspondent in London and a police reporter in New York.

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