

NIH scientists have been angry for months. Now some are rebelling.

More than 90 NIH scientists signed their names to the “Bethesda Declaration” in protest of Trump administration policies they say are harming people’s health.

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By [Carolyn Y. Johnson](#)

More than 90 staffers at the National Institutes of Health signed their names to a [letter of dissent](#) to Director Jay Bhattacharya in a rare sign of open resistance by career government employees.

The letter warns that Trump administration policies such as [terminating](#) peer-reviewed grants, interrupting global collaborations and [firing essential staff](#) are wasting public resources, undermining the NIH’s mission and [harming the health](#) of people in the United States and beyond.

“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 letter says. “Many have raised these concerns to NIH leadership, yet we remain pressured to implement harmful measures.”

Officials who administer grant portfolios, early-career scientists and longtime staffers are among those who signed, calling the document the “Bethesda Declaration” after the city in Maryland where the NIH is headquartered. The letter is modeled after the [Great Barrington Declaration](#), Bhattacharya’s own dissent to the government’s covid policies in 2020, which was written in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and helped catapult him to prominence.

“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,” Bhattacharya said in a statement. “Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the NIH to succeed.”

The Trump administration has described its actions as eliminating red tape, increasing accountability in science and removing ideological influence. It has said that a [new policy for grants that include sub-awards](#) to researchers in foreign countries increases accountability. Another target has been funding that includes diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives aimed at broadening participation in science.

Michael Kratsios, director of the White House Office of Science Technology and Policy, said in a speech in May that “political biases are displacing the vital search for truth,” adding that efforts to make science more inclusive “degrade our scientific enterprise. DEI represents an existential threat to the real diversity of thought that forms the foundation of the scientific community.”

Some NIH employees — a number of whom have participated in protests and walked out of a town hall featuring Bhattacharya — say the Trump administration’s actions have raised existential questions about the state of science in America.

Since the inauguration, dozens of employees who work at the NIH have spoken with The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. They described a climate of fear and anxiety and an inability to perform routine tasks because of the administration’s disruptions.

The letter represents a new level of concern from people within the agency, with some now willing to be identified: It was signed by 92 people by name and 250 additional people anonymously.

Jenna Norton, an NIH program director who said she was speaking as a private citizen, said the fear of being punished for signing the letter was outweighed by the fear of not saying anything.

“We wanted a way to speak up together, to make it clear to ourselves and our colleagues that this isn’t who NIH is,” said Norton, who oversees grants, with a focus on research to address health disparities in kidney and urological diseases. “We aren’t here to harm people. We’re here to help people — and we aren’t being heard when we raise concerns in more traditional ways.”

Ian Morgan, a postdoctoral researcher focused on combating antimicrobial resistance who also said he was speaking as a private citizen, has been at the NIH off and on for nearly 15 years, starting with a summer internship. Morgan said he sees the document as a letter of hope that the course can be corrected.

“I feel like if I put my head down and I didn’t say anything, my research would be somewhat unobjectionable to the current administration and I could get by — but where would that leave the world around me,” Morgan said.

The letter argues that the administration has politicized research by canceling \$9.5 billion of peer-reviewed grants and \$2.6 billion in contracts. It says the administration is abandoning the process that ensures the most meritorious science is funded, citing the decision to fund an “unvetted” flu vaccine project led by two of the institute’s leaders. It opposes administration policies such as canceling the funding that supports the administrative and facilities costs of doing science, and the firing of essential staff.

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The letter also details a widespread fear that the massive slowdown in NIH spending over the past five months could mean the agency will not be able to use all its funding this year — which could be used to justify the budget cuts proposed by the Trump administration.

A group of biomedical advocacy organizations met with Bhattacharya in late May to express concern that the NIH’s current budget might not be spent. Bhattacharya said he would spend all the money allocated to the NIH, according to a letter those agencies sent to him last week.

“We are deeply grateful to you and your staff for taking the time to meet with us on Thursday, May 29. Most importantly, we appreciate your commitment that NIH will fully obligate all FY25 funds by the end of the fiscal year,” the advocacy groups wrote to Bhattacharya.

An accompanying letter signed by prominent scientists, including multiple Nobel laureates, argues that the Make America Healthy Again initiative refers to an “undefined time in the past.” The letter cites massive gains against heart disease, childhood leukemia and measles since 1960.

“Certainly, much work remains to better treat disease and improve the health of Americans, such as addressing increased rates of obesity, diabetes, and opioid dependency. But, glamorizing a mythical past, while ignoring important progress made through biomedical research, does not enhance the health of American people,” the outside scientists wrote.

What readers are saying

The comments express strong support for the NIH staff’s dissent against the Trump administration’s policies, highlighting concerns about the administration’s impact on scientific research and public health. Many commenters praise the bravery of the NIH scientists for standing up... [Show more](#)

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