



Fifty
Shades
of 'Jay'

Jeremy M Berg

Fifty Shades of “Jay”

Introduction

When Stanford health economist Jayanta ('Jay') Bhattacharya was nominated as the new Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I was uncertain what to think. On the one hand, he was a Stanford M.D./Ph.D and tenured faculty member who had competed for and received some NIH grants in the past (as revealed by a quick search of NIH Reporter). Although there was no evidence that he had any experience with either clinical or basic science research, given my low expectations about nominees from the Trump administration, it could have been worse. On the other hand, his major claim to fame appeared to be his co-authorship of the "Great Barrington Declaration", a document that argued against policies, either implemented and under consideration, to manage the COVID pandemic at a time that there were many unknowns and tremendous concerns about hundreds of thousands or millions of perhaps preventable premature deaths.

I watched his confirmation hearing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7zWUKFk1gQ>) with great interest. I was troubled considerably when he described indirect costs as "a kind of tip" that universities receive related to their research grants. Other than political motivations, how could a serious person go into a Senate confirmation hearing unprepared for a topic that was sure to be covered? How could he not bother to become more well-informed about this topic? There were literally hundreds of people at Stanford and around the country who could have helped get him up to speed.

I have been closely monitoring NIH progress and policies throughout the year. When Director Bhattacharya began making public statements of various sorts that revealed his lack of knowledge about NIH, I started to send emails in good faith to share my knowledge about NIH programs with him to help him perform his important job more effectively. At first, he did not respond at all and when he did, he responded using the term "ideological boondoggles" without definition. This ill-advised behavior substantially decreased my hopes for his interest in receiving input about NIH programs and policies as it seemed that he had entrenched political perspectives.

I have, nonetheless, continued to email him on occasions where his public statements or policy changes reveal his ignorance of NIH programs, his political rather than scientific motivations, or his hypocrisy. I believe that speaking truth to power is a great responsibility, especially for someone who has been so privileged throughout his career.

This is a compilation of these emails in their original form (except some typographical errors corrected). I have provided introductions to each email, or series of emails, on a given topic to provide context and other useful information.

Your comments are welcome.

Autism Causes Initiative

Background

On April 21, 2025, NIH Director Bhattacharya gave a presentation to the NIH Council of Councils. This is a group, made up of individuals from the various Advisory Councils, which provides oversight over NIH initiatives that cut across the NIH Institutes and Centers (<https://dpcpsi.nih.gov/council>).

This presentation is available on the meeting videocast (<https://videocast.nih.gov/watch=56725>). At around 1:55:00 in this videocast, Director Bhattacharya discusses a new initiative to identify the causes of autism based on linking databases.



**NIH Initiative:
Understanding ASD**

- NIH is launching an Initiative
- Integrating diverse data enabling researchers to examine complex factors influencing ASD rates.

I had heard some information about this new initiative before and had concerns about how it would work and what information it would be seeking and integrating.

However, my overarching sense in watching this was Déjà vu. In 2007 when I was leading the NIH Director's Pioneer Award program, we had an application from Professor Peter Bearman from Columbia University. The Pioneer program involves interviews of the finalists, so I had seen Professor Bearman present his proposal, which was funded.

Here is the Abstract (<https://reporter.nih.gov/project-details/7341534#description>)

Abstract Text

This project is designed to understand the rapid increase in autism prevalence in the United States over the past two decades. Proposed are new analyses of complex, multilevel temporally sensitive data sets that will enable me to determine the extent to which familial, environmental, gene-environment, and diagnostic drift/substitution are driving the autism epidemic. Detailed attention to and models capable of capturing social network and social influence underpinnings of the epidemic are developed. New analysis models for intercalating spatial and social network data are developed. These models where appropriate are extended to a wide range of developmental disorders that have increased rapidly in prevalence.

The proposal involved integrating databases to try to understand the rapid increases in autism prevalence 18 years ago. The major concerns from the reviewers involved whether he would be successful in getting access to and linking the proposed database.

He was quite successful. Indeed, we has elected to the United States National Academy of Sciences in part because of his accomplishments with this project. Indeed, he was selected to present a briefing to the National Academy upon his induction and chose to speak about this project.

I thought Director Bhattacharya should be aware of this project and its results since it was fully germane to the new initiative and had been funded by NIH, and indeed, funded by a flagship program associated with the NIH Director's office.

I felt that he deserved a heads-up about this, so I sent him an email.

Tue, Apr 29, 2025 at 10:37 AM

Autism causes and NIH funding

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

I watched your Council of Councils presentation with interest.

I was Director of NIGMS from 2003-2011 and led the NIH Director's Pioneer Award program after its first year. In 2007, this program funded an award to Professor Peter Bearman at Columbia University entitled "Social Determinants of the Autism Epidemic".

https://reporter.nih.gov/search/Em2xW_9mLUq2FuBVBIF9NQ/projects

This award which was based on integrating diverse data sets was quite successful. Here is a briefing he did at the National Academy of Sciences annual meeting a decade ago.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_pQLJewHMA

I am glad to try to answer any questions.

Best, Jeremy

I received no response.

On May 7th, NIH released an announcement about the new initiative <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-cms-partner-advance-understanding-autism-through-secure-access-select-medicare-medicaid-data>

Director Bhattacharya was quoted in this announcement:

“This partnership is an important step in our commitment to unlocking the power of real-world data to inform public health decisions and improve lives,” **said NIH Director Dr. Jay Bhattacharya**. “Linking CMS claims data with a secure real-world NIH data platform, fully compliant with privacy and security laws, will unlock landmark research into the complex factors that drive autism and chronic disease – ultimately delivering superior health outcomes to the Americans we serve.”

This announcement raised concerns with me that the data integration strategy might not include key features that had been identified in Professor Bearman’s study.

I wrote to Dr. Bhattacharya with these concerns.

Wed, May 7, 7:31 PM

Autism Causes Study

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

I saw the announcement “NIH, CMS Partner to Advance Understanding of Autism Through Secure Access to Select Medicare and Medicaid Data” in which you are quoted.

I hope you had a chance to watch the 18-minute YouTube video of Dr. Peter Bearman’s presentation at the National Academy of Sciences regarding the causes of the autism epidemic (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_pQLJewHMA) that I shared with you more than a week ago. As I noted, this is based on work largely funded by an NIH Director’s Pioneer Award awarded in 2007. If you watched the presentation, you undoubtedly appreciated the importance of including geographical information (which revealed clusters of cases that appear to be driven by social rather than toxicant exposure) as well as the importance of information about parental age and other factors related to the timing of childbirths.

Will this information be captured in the envisioned integrated data sets? Obviously, such data cannot be added later if the individuals in the data set are effectively deidentified.

Again, I am happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely, Jeremy Berg

Again, I received no response.

Concern about the Level of Remaining NIH Appropriations

Background

The Trump administration had taken a series of actions that had substantially slowed down the rate at which grants were awarded and, hence, appropriated funds were committed. I, and many others in the scientific community, were growing increasingly concerned that NIH was reaching a situation where the agency would not have sufficient time to get all of the appropriated funds committed.

While I had been tracking how far behind fiscal year 2024 NIH was getting in fiscal year 2025, I had not thought hard about how to place this in context. I realized that a sensible way to do this was to look at history rates of funding over the past decade.

I downloaded the relevant data from NIH Reporter and related websites and performed an analysis.

The report I generated is shown below:

Time Remaining for Award Making in Fiscal Year 2025

Jeremy Berg 5/4/2025

The Rate of NIH Grant Making and the Risk of not Investing the Entire NIH Appropriation in Fiscal Year 2025

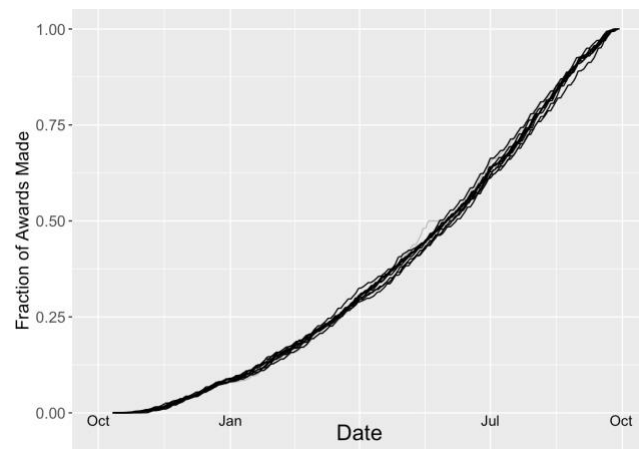
NIH has 27 institutes and centers, of which 24 have grant-making authority. In addition, some grants are funded through the NIH Office of the Director's Common Fund.

The rate does NIH award making

Data about NIH awards are available in the NIH Reporter database.

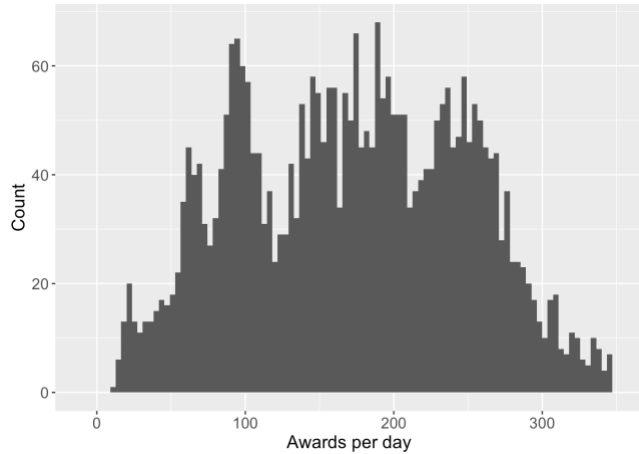
Data for fiscal years 2015-2024 reveal that the number of awards of all types (not including subawards) ranged from 50007 in fiscal year 2015 to 63483 in fiscal year 2024.

A plot of the fraction of awards over the course of these fiscal years is shown below:



The curves are very similar. They are not linear. The rate of making grant awards is relatively low at the beginning of each year and then increases before tapering off at the end of the year. This is due to several factors including the appropriations process (almost always delayed) and the timing of grant application submission opportunities, and the timing of advisory council meetings for grant approval (which occur three times per year).

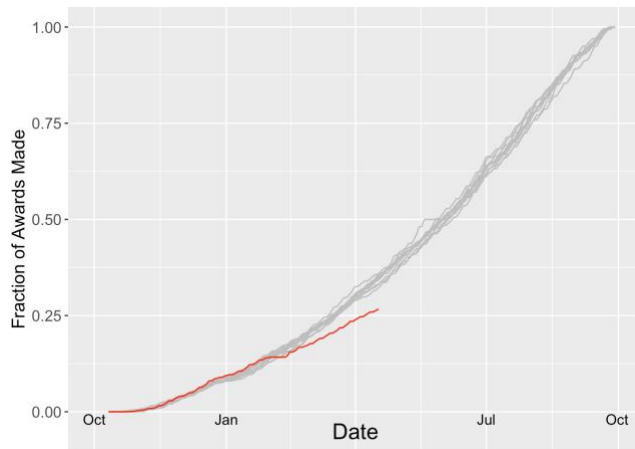
The daily number of grant awards ranges from 0 to 719. However, rather than just looking at daily rates, a more informative quantity is the rate over a more extended period of time. A histogram of the average daily rate over 30 day periods is shown below:



The median for the distribution is 174 with the 80%ile of 246, that is, 80% of all average daily rates are below this value.

Results for fiscal year 2025

The results for fiscal year to date can be added to the previous graph:



This shows that the curve for fiscal year 2025 started off along a normal curve but then, with the grant “pause” at the beginning of the Trump administration in early February 2025, the fiscal year 2025 diverged, lying below the other curves. It has remained there, due to a relatively low rate of award release.

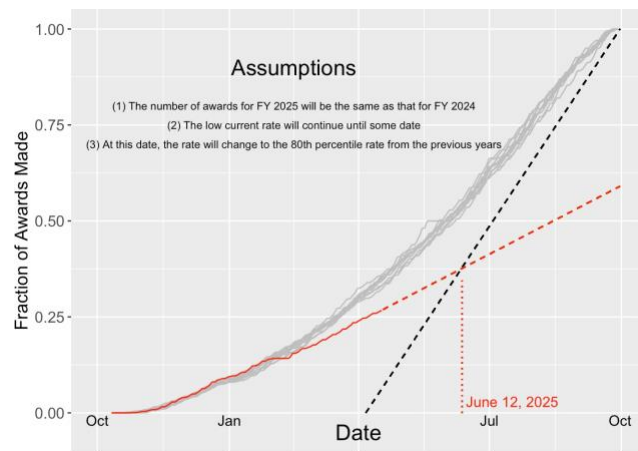
Does NIH have sufficient time to release its full appropriation in fiscal year 2025?

We can address this important question but we need to make some assumptions. One set of limiting assumptions

are:

1. The number of awards for fiscal year 2025 will be the same as that for fiscal year 2024.
2. The low current rate will continue until some date;
3. At this date, the rate will change to the 80th percentile rate from the previous years

from the previous years. The results from these assumptions are shown below:



4.

From this analysis, the rate must change on or before approximately June 12th or there will not be sufficient time to release an adequate number of awards.

Alternatively, either the subsequent rate of award release will have to exceed the 80th percentile rate or the sizes of awards will need to be increased so that more funds will be released with a smaller number of awards.

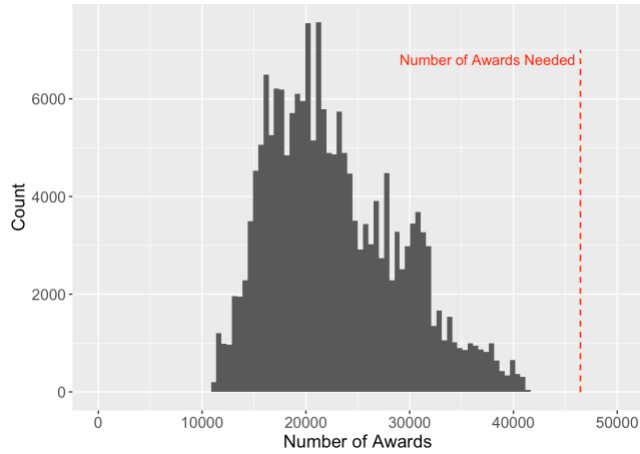
Sustained funding over five months

For the period from May 1st to September 30th, the number of awards that are needed to be made is 46444 and the amount of funding that needs to be distributed is \$27.25 B. This must occur over 152 days. Has this ever occurred?

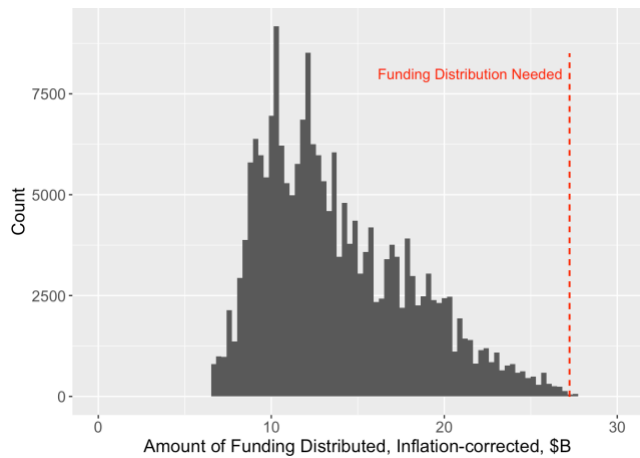
This can be examined by looking at fiscal years 2015 to 2024 over windows of 152 days. The amount of funding in each year was corrected for inflation to 2025 dollars.

The results are shown below.

For the number of awards, it appears that this number is unprecedented over this period of time.



In terms of inflation-corrected amount of funding distributed, this appears to be nearly unprecedented. The maximum amount of inflation-corrected funding distributed over 152 days was \$27.65B in fiscal year 2020.



This analysis suggests that it is even more imperative that the rate of fund distribution accelerate as soon as possible.

I decided that it was important to share this analysis with Director Bhattacharya as he did not have any experience with managing the NIH appropriation. Indeed, most NIH Directors never gain this knowledge as this is managed at the level of NIH institutes and centers who have the actual funding authority and responsibility for NIH grants. Furthermore, I had no knowledge whether Director Bhattacharya had connected with any of the data analysis teams at NIH who could address this sort of question if asked.

I wrote to him on May 4th and shared this analysis.

May 4, 2025, 7:46 PM

Urgent: Appropriated funds must be distributed urgently

See the attached letter and report.

I would appreciate the courtesy of an acknowledgement of receipt.

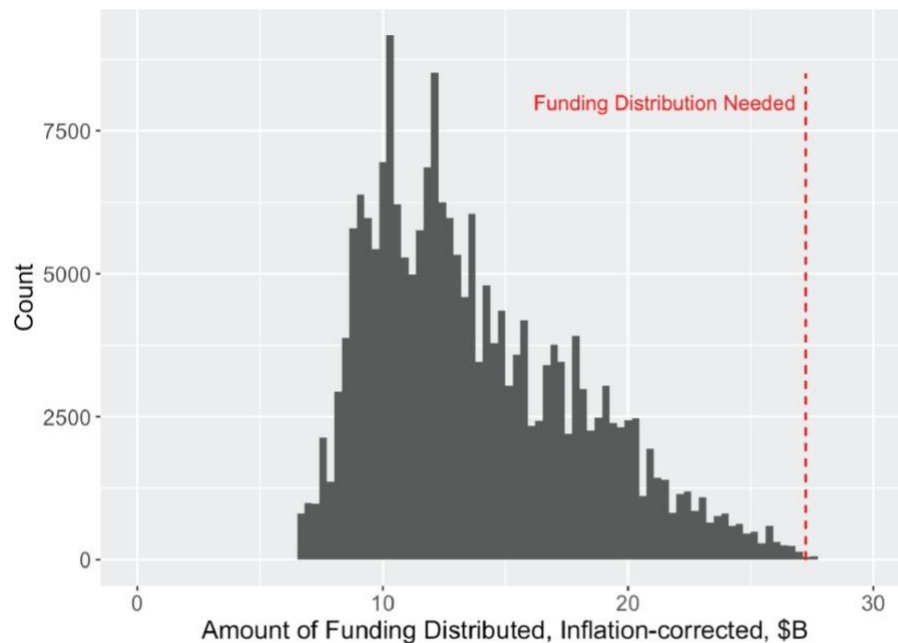
Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg, Ph.D.
Director, NIGMS (2003-2011)
George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations

May 4, 2025

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya,

Many have been concerned about the slow pace of NIH grant making. I recently completed the attached analysis. The bottom line is depicted here which contrasts the historical pace of funding commitment over 5-month periods with the amount of the fiscal year 2025 remaining to be committed after May 1, 2025.



A histogram of the amount of funded distributed over all 152 day periods from fiscal years 2015-2024. The amount of funding needed for 2025 lies at the extreme edge of this distribution.

I realize that some of the events that contributed to this slow pace occurred prior to you assuming the role of NIH Director. However, there is no evidence that the pace has increased since you started.

Perhaps your greatest responsibility as NIH Director is to ensure that the funds appropriated to NIH by Congress are invested to help understand and promote issues related to the health of the American people. Certainly, there are many outstanding applications available to fund at NIH that have been (or soon will be) peer reviewed and approved by NIH advisory councils.

The American people expect you to do your job and work with the Institutes and Centers to make sure that these appropriated funds are committed through approved processes by the end of the fiscal year in September. From this analysis, the rate must change immediately or there will not be sufficient time to fund an adequate level of awards.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg, Ph.D.
Director, National Institute of General Medical Sciences
2003-2011 (G.W. Bush and B. Obama administrations)

I received a response the next morning:

May 5, 2025, 8:41 AM

Jeremy,

I received your letter and analysis. Contrary to the assertion you make in the letter, my job is to make sure that the NIH spends the money that the American people have entrusted us with on projects that advance the health and longevity of the American people. Spending on ideological boondoggles and on dangerous research, the conduct of which risks causing a pandemic for instance, does not advance those goals. I'm committed to making sure funds allocated to the NIH are spent wisely. Thank you for your input.

All the best,
Jay

I was pleased that Director Bhattacharya responded, but disappointed (and even a bit stunned) that he would use a term like "ideological boondoggles" without defining it.

This gave me a better sense of his approach to these issues which has informed my future strategies in dealing with him.

I responded to him:

May 5, 2025, 10:10 AM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: Thank you for your prompt response. Of course you have responsibility to make sure that funds are spent wisely.

Please note that my analysis does not include the effects of any of the grants that have been terminated. I presume some of these would fall into the category of “ideological boondoggles”. The level of funded available for commitment would be even higher if these are included.

What percentage of the pending applications do you believe fall into the categories of contributing to pandemic risk or being “ideological boondoggles”? I would guess it is much less than 10% even with the most expansive definitions. Applications that fall outside of these categories are apparently not being funded at rates that will allow the funds entrusted to NIH by Congress and the American people for the people to gain the benefits of these appropriations.

Sincerely, Jeremy Berg
Sent from my iPhone

I did not receive a response to my question.

On July 10th, 2025, Kate Zernike published an article in the New York Times entitled

The Surprising Scientists Hit by Trump's D.E.I. Cuts

The N.I.H. has terminated hundreds of diversity grants awarded to young researchers, many of whom come from the very places that supported Trump.

(https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/10/us/trump-science-nih-grants-dei-cuts.html?unlocked_article_code=1.VU8.e5oB.sGxegBP_lin&smid=url-share)

This article highlighted several white scientists from disadvantaged backgrounds of various sorts who had successfully competed for grants from the NIH MOSAIC (Maximizing Opportunities for Scientific and Academic Independent Careers) program. This is a K99-R00 transition award program that funds a mentored postdoctoral experience and then provides research funding if an awardee can obtain a suitable academic position. They are both highly competitive and quite prestigious. The MOSAIC program was a version of this program that was developed to encourage scientists from groups traditionally underrepresented in biomedical research.

The purpose of the Maximizing Opportunities for Scientific and Academic Independent Careers (MOSAIC) Postdoctoral Career Transition Award to Promote Diversity (K99/R00) program (<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-21-271.html>) is to support a cohort of early career, independent investigators from diverse backgrounds conducting research in NIH mission areas. The long-term goal of this program is to enhance diversity in the biomedical research workforce. The MOSAIC K99/R00 program is designed to facilitate a timely transition of promising postdoctoral researchers from diverse backgrounds (e.g., see [Notice of NIH's Interest in Diversity](#)) from their mentored, postdoctoral research positions to independent, tenure-track or equivalent research-intensive faculty positions.

The Notice of NIH's Interest in Diversity has been taken down, but is available from the Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250123164512/https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-031.html>)

There are four categories of diversity specifically laid out in this notice:

- A. Individuals from racial and ethnic groups that have been shown by the National Science Foundation to be underrepresented in health-related sciences on a national basis
- B. Individuals with disabilities, who are defined as those with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities
- C. Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, defined as those who meet two or more selected criteria
- D. Women in scientific disciplines where women have been shown to be underrepresented

Applicants who applied to the MOSAIC program had to provide an explanation justifying their eligibility, but the application was otherwise analogous to the parent K99/R00 program, and the level of competition was the same for both programs.

The grants in the MOSAIC program were terminated by the Trump administration because the MOSAIC program was categorized as a "DEI" program. These promising young investigators had their careers disrupted by these ill-informed actions that were deemed illegal by a federal judge first appointed by Ronald Reagan.

While I was a bit concerned about one interpretation of the New York Times article (we should be concerned about these grant terminations because they involve white people and not just racial minorities), I was glad to see coverage of the richness (dare I say, diversity) of these programs. Given that Director Bhattacharya had not demonstrated that he was spending much of his time understanding what NIH programs actually supported, I thought it was important to share the New York Times article with him.

Thu, Jul 10, 2:19 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I wanted to make sure that you had seen this article (https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/10/us/trump-science-nih-grants-dei-cuts.html?unlocked_article_code=1.VU8.e5oB.sGxegBP_lin&smid=url-share [Gift Link]) and attached.

This story captures just a few of the talented young scientists who have been caught up in the anti-DEI, anti-"ideological boondoggle" agenda to which you have been contributing.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Transgender Scientists and Ben Barres

Background

During the month of May, I continued to think about Director Bhattacharya's "ideological boondoggles" comment. Given the vilification of trans people across the country and the Executive Order (XXX), I thought that grants to study transgender health almost certainly fits into this category in his mind.

I often think about the late Ben Barres, a transgender scientist from Stanford, whom I got to know through an NIH program. In 2004, NIH started a new program called the "NIH Director's Pioneer Award" program. These were large, 5-year grants awarded through a novel process with five-page essay applications articulating problems of interest and previous evidence of innovation. The program was intended to identify scientists who might not apply to NIH through normal mechanisms who had a lot to contribute to the NIH mission. The application process included interviews with the top 20-25 candidates.

When the first awards were announced, the winners were all male and several of them were well-established within the NIH system. I expressed disappointment to the NIH Deputy Director and then to the NIH Director about these outcomes and soon was asked to run the Pioneer program for the next year. Many women, women's groups, and others raised concerns about the lack of any women among the winners. They were concerned that this reflected bias in the process, represented a failure to capture pioneering talent, and sent bad messages to the scientific community.

Among the most vocal critics was Ben Barres, a leading neuroscientist from Stanford. Ben was very vocal with his concerns about the lack of representation of women and made some suggestions about possible sources of bias. As I was now running the program, all emails about the program were forwarded to me. I found Ben to be very passionate and relentless, but also thoughtful. We made a number of small adjustments to the program processes and were pleased to receive a substantial number of applications from both women and men. We also were able to recruit a good mix of reviewers. The first year the program staff involved with the program had to scramble at the due date for the applications as the number of last-minute applications exceeded their expectations.

For the interview committee, we required scientists who could cover lots of territory since a group of about 10 committee members had to cover 25 applications spanning the entire NIH mission. I thought of Ben. He was an MD/PhD neurologist and neuroscientist with broad knowledge and interests. We asked him to serve as the committee chair, and he agreed. A few days before the committee was scheduled to meet, I mentioned that we had recruited Ben as chair to the director of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke. She said "Ben will be great... You do know that Ben used to be Barbara, right?" I did not know and was taken aback.

Ben was, in fact, great as chair. In addition, I got to know him and discovered that he had absolutely unique perspectives on gender in science. He had been Barbara into his 40's and he had achieved tenure at Stanford. He then transitioned to Ben after discovering that gender dysphoria was a well-known phenomenon and his discomfort about being treated as a girl that he had felt essentially his whole life was not unique to him. Ben had

experienced decades as a female scientist and was into his second decade experiencing being a male scientist. He told me shocking stories such as one about one of the first seminars he gave as Ben when one scientist commented to another “His work is so much better than his sister’s.”

I interacted with Ben around some additional issues after the Pioneer interviews and found him to be one of the most committed, thoughtful, and passionate scientists I had ever met. In 2006, I was saddened to learn that he had died in his early 60’s from pancreatic cancer. He had a mutation in the BRCA2 gene that predisposed him to cancer and had earlier survived breast cancer as Barbara which led to a double mastectomy which he regarded as an improvement.

Ben wrote an autobiography which was published after his death. “Autobiography of a Transgender Scientist” recounted both his experiences as a girl interested in science, his career, and his transition and its consequences, and his scientific accomplishments around establishing the role of glia in the brain. It is a captivating book. I was thrilled to learn in June, 2024 that an award-winning filmmaker had been fascinated by Ben’s book and his story and was endeavoring to make a biopic entitled “Ask the Question” based on his book ([link](#)).

I decided that Director Bhattacharya would benefit from reading Ben’s book and decided to have a copy sent to him. I emailed him to let him know that this book was on the way.

May 19, 2025, 3:56 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I took the liberty of sending you a copy of Ben Barres's autobiography. You may have known Ben (or known of Ben) as he was a longtime colleague of yours at Stanford. I got to know Ben when he helped NIH adjust the NIH Director's Pioneer Award program and served as Chair of the interview committee. I learned a lot from Ben; you might as well. He was a great person and a very important scientist.

The book should arrive from Amazon on Thursday.

Sincerely, Jeremy Berg

I did not receive a response from Director Bhattacharya. However, I did receive a response from the NIH Executive Secretariat, a group that handles official correspondence, three weeks later.

Tue, Jun 10, 1:53 PM

Dear Dr. Berg,

Thank you for your email to Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and for sending a copy of *The Autobiography of a Transgender Scientist*.

Dr. Bhattacharya appreciates receiving this tribute to the work and remarkable life of a fellow Stanford student, Ben Barres.

Sincerely,
NIH Executive Secretariat

It would have been better if they had not bothered to respond. Ben was not a fellow Stanford student. Barres attended MIT as an undergraduate, and Dartmouth and Harvard for medical school and graduate school, respectively. Barres' experiences as a woman at MIT figure prominently in his book. It seemed clear that Director Bhattacharya had not bothered to read it.

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing Testimony

Background

NIH has terminated hundreds of ongoing grants. These were not termination “for cause”, but rather because the topics were deemed objectionable to the administration because they involved “DEI”, transgender health, vaccine hesitancy, and other topics. Two lawsuits were filed about these terminations, one filed by the American Public Health Association (APHA), the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW), and Ibis Reproductive Health with legal representation from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Democracy Forward (<https://www.aclu.org/cases/apha-v-nih>) and the other filed by Attorneys General from 16 states with Democratic Attorneys General. Because of substantial overlap, the suits were combined.

On June 10th, 2025, Director Bhattacharya testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee that oversees the NIH (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLRsD8ABGOs>). He testified that he had made the decisions to move away from “politicized science’ (around 26:30).

On June 16th, 2025, Federal District Court Judge William Young, first appointed to the court 40 years ago by President Ronald Reagan, ruled against the NIH and HHS, striking down the terminations on the grounds that they violated the Administrative Procedure Act. Judge Young also made a strong statement from the bench, calling out what he saw as overt racial discrimination (<https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-district-court-strikes-down-nih-unlawful-directives-that-led-to-the-elimination-of-critical-research>).

I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to call his attention to Judge Young’s ruling.

Jun 18, 2025, 3:26 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

In the recent hearing before the Senate HELP committee, you testified that you have made the decisions to move away from “politicized science”, in response to a question from Senator Baldwin. Earlier this week, a Federal Judge, first appointed to the Federal bench by Ronald Reagan when you were 16 years old, ruled that many of these grant terminations were “arbitrary and capricious”. His decision was based, in part, on the fact that no evidence was introduced that any serious analysis was done on the content of these grants prior to terminating them.

Today, according to news reports, grants to Columbia University were unfrozen this morning around 9:30 A.M. and then refrozen by 2:30 P.M.. I know from my time at NIH that grants management specialists were almost certainly working hard releasing awards during the day, only to be told to undo all their work in the afternoon.

I realize that you are in a challenging political environment. But you are being paid by American taxpayers to lead the NIH, and you need to do so. You need to treat this deadly serious job with the respect it deserves. You need to protect the NIH staff from the whims and fits from others in the administration so that they can do their jobs, supporting important research that is foundational for the health of our nation now, and in the years to come.

Sincerely, Jeremy M. Berg

Director, National Institute of General Medical Sciences, 2003-2011

I made a minor correction to my email the next day.

Jun 19, 2025, 3:44 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: In re-reading my email, I realized that it was the Senate Appropriations subcommittee and not the HELP committee where you testified about personally authorizing the termination of grants related to "politicized science".

Sincerely, Jeremy Berg

I did not receive a response to either email.

Funding Innovative Early Career Investigators

Background

Director Bhattacharya had started to appear on a range of podcasts, often with right-leaning hosts. He appeared a podcast with hedge fund manager Bill Ackman in late June. About 20 minutes into the podcast, the conversation turned to supporting innovative research by young investigators. Director Bhattacharya said that he had heard from the former President of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) about funding models. Bill Ackman suggested that NIH should funding promising early-stage investigators with substantial 5-7 year grants. Bhattacharaya said “And I think that is a very productive way forward, something we will definitely look into to figure out how to do this in an NIH context.”

I was dismayed because I had played a major role in setting up a program at NIH with exactly these characteristics in 2006. It is called the “NIH Director’s New Innovator Award” program. This program has been evaluated and is regarded as being highly successful. It was deeply troubling that Director Bhattacharya had managed to become NIH Director, and participate in a discussion with the former President of HHMI about funding innovative research from early-stage investigators, and still did not know about the NIH Director’s New Innovator Award program. I mean, it is called the “NIH DIRECTOR’S New Innovator Award” program.

I emailed Director Bhattacharya on the Fourth of July.

Jul 4, 2025, 6:22 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I am spending some of my holiday listening to some of your podcast appearances. I was listening to your podcast with Bill Ackman and stopped when I heard this exchange:

Ackman: Why not have a ... back the young scientists, you know the brilliant young scientist where you are evaluating the person, and you say. I am going to do a Howard Hughes-type grant. And take some portion of NIH funding and put it toward ... why not have actually have a specific pool of capital available where you are betting on the athlete, you know, the promise of the athlete, and give them longer term funding, you know 5 to 7 years?

Bhattacharya: I think that is a great idea, Bill. In fact I was just talking with the former head of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Bob Tjian and he pitched exactly a very similar idea to me. And I think that is a very productive way forward, something we will definitely look into to figure out how to do this in an NIH context.

I want to save you some trouble in figuring this out. I was involved in establishing such a program in 2007. It is quite visible and called the "NIH Director's New Innovator Award" program (DP2).

I attach a document that includes some of the history, links to evaluations of this program that have been done, and other materials.

I would strongly recommend that you arrange briefings from knowledgeable NIH staff about programs that align with your stated priorities of high risk research (perhaps, particularly those with the "NIH Director's" designation on them), replication, and so on. It is embarrassing to me as a former NIH Institute Director who makes so many extensive public appearances and does not acknowledge existing NIH programs, either out of ignorance or for other reasons.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or require additional information.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

Here is the attachment:

In February 2007, I was called out of a meeting to meet with NIH Director Elias Zerhouni and Budget Director John Bartrum (now Major General in the Air Force and Senior Advisor to the Department of Veterans Affairs (<https://department.va.gov/staff-biographies/john-j-bartrum/>)) to discuss a possible new program. Congress was working on mid-year plans to fund the government, and they expressed enthusiasm for the recently launched NIH Director's Pioneer Award Program, and had heard Dr. Zerhouni's deep concerns regarding young investigators. As I was now the lead on the Pioneer program, they asked me if we could set up a "junior Pioneer" program in time to fund awards by the end of the fiscal year in September. I said that I thought we could and headed back to the Natcher building to talk with our staff to see how this could be accomplished. This became the NIH Director's New Innovator Award Program (<https://commonfund.nih.gov/newinnovator>). These awards provided 5 years of funding with \$1.5 M over this period (in 2007, approximately \$2.3 M today). The program involved a 10-page essay rather than a traditional NIH proposal (then 25 pages) featuring mainly evidence of past accomplishments, and articulation of the problem of interest.

This program has been subjected to arms-length evaluations (Outcomes: https://commonfund.nih.gov/sites/default/files/HRHR%20New%20Innovator%20Award%20Outcomes%20Evaluation%202007-2009_508%20compliant.pdf); Process: <https://commonfund.nih.gov/sites/default/files/HRHR%20NIA%20FY%202007-2009%20Process%20Evaluation.pdf>). The New Innovator program has been seen as a model and leaders have called for its expansion. For example, Science Editor-in-Chief wrote an editorial in 2009 entitled "On incentives for Innovation" (<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1184848>). Dr. Alberts wrote:

The New Innovator Award and two others that specifically encourage innovation (NIH's Pioneer and Transformative R01 Awards) make a big difference to those who receive them. But there are far too few to change the culture for scientists starting new labs. Most remain unwilling to take the risk of pursuing ambitious ideas, recognizing that extensive preliminary results will be required to obtain funding from a traditional study section.

NIH has committed \$80 million to support New Innovator Awards for 2010. One can ask whether this investment of only 0.27% of the NIH budget is appropriate. To me, the answer is a definite no. A major increase in the number of these 5-year awards to, say, 500 each year would send a very different signal to young people by supporting a culture of innovation and thus the long-term health of the scientific enterprise. Private foundations (for example, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Wellcome Trust) continue to promote initiatives that support creative and transformative research. National governments should take serious note.

In preparing this note, I searched for the original Press Release when the New Innovator program was announced. I found it, but discovered this:



The page you're looking for isn't available.

It's possible that the page is temporarily unavailable, has been removed or renamed, or no longer exists.

Here are some suggestions:

- Search for the page by entering keyword(s) in the search field above.
- Use the tabs above to find information you want.
- If you typed the page address in the address bar, make sure that you spelled it correctly.

Please send us the broken link of the page you're looking for, as well as the page where you found it, so we can fix it.

Fortunately, the Internet Archive captured the site before it was taken down (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20250118231410/https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-director-launches-program-innovative-new-investigators>)



I would suggest that you make efforts to receive briefings from knowledgeable NIH staff about programs aligned with your stated priorities (High risk-high-reward research, Replication studies, and so on).

You will benefit from learning more about NIH's previous and ongoing efforts rather than allowing others to attempt to hide or delete it.

I did not receive a response.

The Use of Animals in Research

Background

On July 7th, at an FDA-NIH Workshop on Reducing Animal Testing, Nicole Kleinstreuer, Acting NIH Deputy Director for Program Coordination, Planning and Strategic Initiatives at NIH, made an announcement that “NIH will no longer seek proposals exclusively for animal models”. This comment caused considerable consternation in the scientific community as it was not clear what she was saying. In the end, it appears that what she meant was that NIH would no longer issue Notices of Funding Opportunity that called exclusively for development of animal models. In the past, NIH had had programs directed to, for example, the development of mouse models for disease. The sloppy use of language of a policy with potentially broad implications was unfortunate.

I decided to email Dr. Kleinstreuer and Director Bhattacharya to seek clarification and to remind them that research using a wide range of animal systems had led to fundamental insights that informed treatments to promote human health.

Dear Drs. Kleinstreuer and Bhattacharya: I watched with interest part of the "FDA & NIH Workshop on Reducing Animal Testing" including Dr. Kleinstreuer's presentation. As you likely know, Dr. Kleinstreuer's announcement that "NIH will no longer seek proposals exclusively for animal models" has gotten considerable attention.

While this comment was made in the context of discussions of research toward the applied end of the research spectrum, that is, near therapeutic testing and development, this blanket statement could be interpreted to include fundamental research in a wide variety of organisms that have transformed our understanding of biology.

Perhaps one of the most profound observations about biology made and reinforced over and over during the past 80 years is the great unity of biology at the molecular and cellular levels. Molecules and mechanisms are remarkably conserved from unicellular organisms through human beings, beginning with the universality of DNA and the genetic code, but extending into, for example, detailed mechanisms in the nervous system.

At the same time, many organisms offer advantages by virtue of unique characteristics, ease of growth, scale, and so on that make them uniquely powerful for uncovering fundamental biological mechanisms that apply to all or nearly all organisms including human beings. Studies with human populations, human cell lines, and AI cannot possibly replace these animal-based studies.

This is illustrated by observing that the seminal discoveries leading to the Nobel Prizes in Medicine or Physiology over the past 25 years have been based in mice, rats, nematode worms, fruit flies, frogs, yeast, tetrahymena, grasshoppers, sea urchins, and sea squirts.

I understand that having the most predictive, cost-effective, and ethically sound tools for testing the efficacy and safety of potential therapeutics is a compelling need.

However, I hope that you would issue a statement clarifying the proposed policy change regarding the use of animals for fundamental and mechanistic studies that are essential to pushing forward the NIH mission in the short run and, especially, in the long run.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a reply.

The Bethesda Declaration

Background

On June 9th, 2025, a group of courageous current and former staff members sent Director Bhattacharya a letter expressing their concerns about actions that had been taken by the Trump administration that the signers felt were inconsistent with the NIH mission. They termed this letter of dissent the “Bethesda Declaration”, referencing the “Great Barrington Declaration”, an open letter of dissent against COVID policies that was written by Bhattacharya and two colleagues.

Here is the text of the Bethesda Declaration:

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya,

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. Keeping NIH at the forefront of biomedical research requires our stalwart commitment to continuous improvement. But 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.

Many have raised these concerns to NIH leadership, yet we remain pressured to implement harmful measures. Today, we come directly to you. We include Secretary Kennedy and members of Congress who oversee NIH. We look forward to working with you and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) leadership to maintain NIH as the world leader of biomedical research.

Our Shared Commitment to Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a core scientific principle, and we deeply appreciate your public commitment to it at your confirmation hearing, in your April 24 statement on academic freedom, and in recent media interviews. You said: "I will establish a culture of respect for free speech in science and scientific dissent at the NIH," "Dissent is the very essence of science," and "...dissenting voices need to be heard and allowed." We hope you will welcome this dissent, which we modeled after your Great Barrington Declaration.

Our Concerns

This Administration has forced NIH, under your watch, to:

1) Politicize research by halting high-quality, peer reviewed grants and contracts. Academic freedom should not be applied selectively based on political ideology. To achieve political aims, NIH has targeted multiple universities with indiscriminate grant terminations, payment freezes

for ongoing research, and blanket holds on awards regardless of the quality, progress, or impact of the science. Based on political preferences and without input from NIH scientific staff or Congress, NIH is censoring critical research and programs addressing:

- **Health disparities.** U.S. Law (42 U.S.C. § 282) states that NIH *shall* "utilize diverse study populations, with special consideration to biological, social, and other determinants of health that contribute to health disparities." Yet, NIH has stigmatized and abruptly cut off funding for research mislabeled "Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI)." Achieving your stated goal to "solve the American chronic disease crisis" requires research addressing the social and structural drivers of health disparities.
- **COVID-19, long COVID, and immunization.** We still have much to learn about the health and social consequences of COVID-19 and our response. Such research is needed to reduce the risk of future pandemics, optimize pandemic response policies, and address the well-documented and debilitating consequences of long COVID.
- **Health impacts of climate change.** Substantial evidence shows human-driven climate change leads to higher rates of disease and death, such as asthma, heart disease, and stillbirths. Research is critical to find effective ways to reduce these and other health impacts of climate change.
- **Gender identity, sexual health, and the needs of intersex people in the U.S.** These topics deserve research attention, and NIH has a long tradition of supporting rigorous research in these fields.
- **Broad participation in biomedical research.** Robust research shows diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones. A broad workforce strengthens research capacity and supports globally competitive science. Due to misunderstanding of its workforce diversity programs, NIH terminated top-scoring grants to scientists from underrepresented backgrounds, while maintaining poorer-scoring grants from standard pathways, contrary to the merit-based system that makes NIH a global research leader.

Since January 20, 2025, NIH has terminated 2,100 research grants totaling around \$9.5 billion and \$2.6 billion in contracts. This undercuts long-standing NIH policies designed to maximize return on investment by working with grantees to address concerns and complete studies. Many terminations contradict federal regulations that mandate protections for research participants and require grant awards to specify potential termination reasons. These terminations:

- **Throw away years of hard work and millions of dollars.** Ending a \$5 million research study when it is 80% complete does not save \$1 million, it wastes \$4 million.
- **Shirk commitments to participants**, who braved personal risk to give the incredible gift of biological samples, understanding that their generosity would fuel scientific discovery and improve health.
- **Risk participant health.** NIH trials are being halted without regard to participant safety, abruptly stopping medications or leaving participants with unmonitored device implants.
- **Damage hard-earned public trust**, counter to your stated goal to improve trust in NIH.

We urge you as NIH Director to restore grants delayed or terminated for political reasons so that life-saving science can continue.

2) Interrupt global collaboration. We would gladly work with you to improve existing systems to monitor awards with foreign components. But dissolving foreign collaborations while we await new procedures harms research participants and slows scientific discovery, cutting American scientists off from the global scientific community, preventing access to technologies only available abroad, and eliminating critical research that crosses political borders. ***We urge you as NIH Director to allow rigorously peer-reviewed research with vetted foreign collaborators to continue without disruption.***

3) Undermine peer review. Independent peer review is the bedrock of NIH science, directing scarce resources toward the most impactful research and ensuring credible findings that can lead to better health. Without independent peer review, we risk losing scientific integrity and public trust. NIH is ignoring peer review to cater to political whims, pulling applications prior to review and removing high-scoring grants from funding consideration. HHS has redirected this funding to unvetted projects, like the Taubenberger-Memoli vaccine project. ***We urge you as NIH Director to restore peer review and hold political appointees to the same standards as other scientists.***

4) Enact a blanket 15% cap on indirect costs. Until recently, indirect costs were negotiated using well-established criteria, accounting for critical research needs and very real costs, such as buildings, animal facilities, computers, libraries, and administrative support. The arbitrary 15% cap would hinder research, risk viability of universities and hospitals in states across the country, force universities to rescind graduate student positions, limit undergraduate research training, and damage the incredibly successful NIH-university partnerships that have improved health through scientific advances. ***We urge you as NIH Director to continue indirect rates that account for the research costs borne by academic institutions.***

5) Fire essential NIH staff. The cuts to talented, hardworking professionals and critical departments without thought to their purpose or need has slowed the pace of science, held up extramural grant and contract funding, made NIH less transparent and efficient, and put Clinical Center patients at risk. ***We urge you as NIH Director to reinstate the people who make NIH work.***

Delivering on your duty to obligate NIH funds

Combined, these actions have resulted in an unprecedented reduction in NIH spending that ***does not*** reflect efficiency but rather a dramatic reduction in life-saving research. Some may use the false impression that NIH funding is not needed to justify the draconian cuts proposed in the President's Budget. This spending slowdown reflects a failure of your legal duty to use

congressionally-appropriated funds for critical NIH research. Each day that NIH continues to disrupt research, your ability to deliver on this duty narrows.

Who We Are

We are workers from every Institute and Center at NIH. We are devoted to the NIH mission: to seek and apply fundamental knowledge "to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability." We share your stated goal of supporting impactful research that, as you said at your confirmation hearing, is "vital to our country's future and, indeed, the world's." We work hard every day to carefully steward public funds to drive impactful, cutting-edge research. We want to work together to maintain NIH's tradition of excellence.

On June 9, 2025, we sign this declaration in Bethesda, Maryland, U.S. In addition to the named signers, we include anonymous signers and speak for countless others at NIH who share our concerns but who — due to a culture of fear and suppression created by this Administration — chose not to sign their names for fear of retaliation.

I had learned about the existence of the Bethesda Declaration a couple of weeks before it was eventually released. I managed to get connected to the primary authors and learn about their plans. I realized that I and, I thought, many others in the scientific community and the public would be interested in having an opportunity to sign a statement in support of these brave and committed public servants. I drafted such a statement. I realized that I did not have any experience in collecting signatures online. I reached out to Colette Delawalla, the founder of Stand Up for Science (SUFS), an organization that had been playing a leading role in pushing back against some of the anti-science actions in the country. She agreed that SUFS would be a partner in launching and publicizing the Bethesda Declaration and the support letter.

Here is the text of the support letter:

The mission of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is to “seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability.”

In public comments, NIH Director, Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharya, has recognized the critical nature of this mission and has described the NIH as the “crown jewel of American biomedical science”.

Unfortunately, many of the actions of the current administration are inconsistent with this mission and statement. These actions undermine the unique and productive partnership between the federal government and universities, academic medical centers, and research institutes that has served the American people well over many decades. They are damaging the hard-earned trust between the NIH, academia, and the public that is essential for long-term progress.

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. We stand with these committed professionals in support of reversing the harmful actions of this administration. 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.

As has been done historically, decisions and monitoring of applications and grants should be conducted by scientifically trained NIH staff through well-established processes including rigorous peer review. Such decisions must not be made by anonymous individuals outside of NIH.

Like any large organization, NIH would benefit periodic review and strategic reforms. However, any reforms should be developed in partnership with NIH staff and other stakeholders through careful and thoughtful analysis. They should not occur through arbitrary changes with no clear purpose or benefits, and without careful consideration of potential risks and adverse consequences—especially to the research participants who have entrusted NIH and its partners with their health.

The current endeavor to Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) refers to some undefined time in the past. Since 1960, the death rate due to heart disease has been cut in half, going from 560 deaths per 100,000 people to approximately 230 deaths per 100,000 today. From 1960 to the present day, the five-year survival rate for childhood leukemia has increased nearly 10-fold, to over 90% for some forms. In 1960, the rate of measles infection was approximately 250 cases per 100,000 people compared with a near zero rate now (at least until recently). These are but a few of many examples. 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.

Before the mid-1960s, many of the advances that were ushering in a new era in biology were coming from Europe. However, with support from the NIH, the contributions of American scientists grew over the next decades and America became the internationally recognized hub for biomedical research and training. This, combined with the American entrepreneurial spirit, led to the creation of the biotechnology industry. America was an important partner in the successful international project to sequence the human genome in its entirety and to characterize many variations that contribute to health and disease susceptibility. These advances, and associated technologies, have provided profound insights into the mechanisms of many diseases, both common and rare, that are yielding opportunities for real progress to advance human health, some of which have been realized.

Now is the time to push forward the NIH mission and all that has been built to support it, not to disable it. We urge NIH and HHS leadership to work in partnership with the NIH staff members who have spoken out to refocus on this goal using time-tested processes

to award and sustain support for the range of activities that drives the NIH mission, now and into the future.

On July 18th, 2025, Director Bhattacharya did an interview with Walter Isaacson on Amanpour and Company (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNRfax5LcZM>). During this interview, he stated that he was going to meet with the signers of the Bethesda Declaration.

I knew that this meeting had been arranged, but that the person who actually sent the email to Director Bhattacharya with the Bethesda Declaration as well as signers who has been visible in public regarding issues covered by the Bethesda Declaration.

I felt it was important to try to encourage Director Bhattacharya to include all of the signers including these individuals. To my knowledge, he had not been involved in setting up the meeting and I thought it was possible that he did not know about these exclusions.

I emailed Director Bhattacharya the next day.

Jul 19, 2025, 4:26 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I watched with interest your interview with Walter Isaacson. You may not know that Walter attended an all-day Institute and Center Directors retreat during my time as Director of NIGMS. He is an impressive person.

I heard that you are meeting with the signatories of the Bethesda Declaration next week. I have heard that the meeting is on Monday. I also have heard from numerous sources that the meeting does not include the NIH staff member who actually emailed you the Bethesda Declaration nor several other members who have been visible in public speaking about the Declaration.

Excluding certain signatories, particularly the most outspoken ones, seems quite inconsistent with your statement that "you really value this kind of collaborative back and forth."

In my view, it makes you look unserious about encouraging thoughtful dissent.

I hope you will rectify this situation before the meeting takes place.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response and there were not additional invitations to the meeting which did take place. Note that this meeting took place fully six weeks after the receipt of the Declaration.

Comments from Director Bhattacharya about “Politicization of Science”

Background

As I listened to the rest of Director Bhattacharya’s interview with Walter Issacson, he commented on how he viewed the “politicization” of science funded by NIH. I found it very frustrating that he seemed to know (or care) nothing about the NIH programs intended to increase representation in the biomedical workforce: their history; their purpose; the connection (and lack of connection) with minority health. He concluded that the “DEI” programs were a failure because there were still health disparities. His statement was so ignorant and wrong-headed, I felt I had an obligation to enlighten him.

I emailed him a few hours after my previous email.

Sat, Jul 19, 8:17 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

Toward the end of your interview with Walter Isaacson, you made what I feel to be some truly outlandish and ill-informed comments. You said

"There were elements of the NIH portfolio that were also like that... essentially trying to use the NIH as a weapon in a political war that we are really poorly equipped to fight....ah, the DEI, for instance. I think that's something the NIH..... I [unintelligible] strongly believe that we should invest in minority health. If minority populations have bad...worse health outcomes... have bad health outcomes, we, the NIH, as part of our mission, should invest in improving the health of minority populations. I 100% believe in that. But what did those DEI investments actually improve minority health? No, minority health has lagged behind, just as the health of many, many other American groups. We have to, like, use the NIH to improve health, rather than to use the NIH as part of an ideological political war. So I think removing that, which they are calling political, is actually depoliticizing the NIH."

Let me list some of the issues I have with this statement.

(1) "DEI" is not defined. This lack of a definition was a key concern from the Reagan-appointed judge who oversaw two lawsuits against NIH and HHS and contributed to his finding that many grant terminations were capricious, arbitrary, and illegal.

(2) Assuming you are using "DEI" to refer to NIH programs to increase representation of groups historically underrepresented in biomedical research, you would do well to learn some of the history of these programs. These programs go back to the 1960's where efforts were made to capture some of the talent among African Americans who were not exposed to biomedical research opportunities. The creation of these programs was, in large part, a partnership between Dr. Ruth Kirschstein, one of the icons of NIH, and Republican Senator Ed Brooke. The history is well described in the biography of Ruth Kirschstein, freely available on the NIH website (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/history/always-there-remarkable-life-ruth-lillian-kirschstein-md>). These were not established as part of some ideological political battle, but rather as well-studied attempts to advance the NIH mission. You would also benefit from learning more about Dr. Kirschstein who contributed to NIH and its noble mission in many ways.

(3) I hope you are aware of the large body of literature that reveals that representation matters in medicine and biomedical research. Individuals from racial minority backgrounds tend to have better health outcomes when treated by healthcare providers from the same background. This is also true for research. Individuals tend to be attracted to research fields to which they feel some personal connection. This is true for cancer research, basic science, and health disparities research. Indeed, NIH's own study (Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists, Science Advances, 2019 attached) revealed that 20% of the

gap in grant success rates for Black scientists could be attributed to choosing topics such as minority health that tended to be underfunded.

(4) You cite the lack of progress regarding health disparities. Indeed, addressing health disparities are a key, perhaps the key, to making America healthier. However, to blame NIH programs focused on workforce diversity for the lack of progress reveals a complete lack of understanding of these programs. Much research and, particularly, implementation of policies remains to be done to make progress on health disparities and capricious termination of grants and programs, some of which were, in fact, focused on health disparities, is misaligned with your stated goals.

(5) You fail to note that the eligibility criteria for NIH "diversity" programs are much broader than racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, I previously sent you an article with interviews of some of the young scientists whose grants were terminated for the sole reason that they applied to a program with a "diversity" focus. Importantly, these programs do not involve set aside funds but are just as competitive as their "parent" programs. I don't know your path to Stanford when you had spent your entire educational and faculty career. I, too, received my B.S. and M.S. degrees from Stanford. I was privileged to grow up in an academic family where I understood the science career path and benefitted from an outstanding public school system. However, I am certain that the NIH mission will be better fulfilled by including individuals with different, and less privileged, backgrounds in biomedical research.

(6) You cite the use of NIH as a weapon in political wars. This is, in fact, a huge problem. The Trump administration is using NIH funding as a cudgel to punish universities. Please explain how blocking reimbursement for all grants at institutions such as Northwestern University without any clear explanation or request serves the NIH mission. The pretext for these actions is, even more offensively, claimed to be antisemitism, often in the context of protests against the disgusting behavior of the Israeli government in Gaza. Accusing someone of antisemitism because of their passionate objections to these outrageous actions seems to me to be analogous to accusing someone of being anti-Catholic because of their outrage over the Catholic Church's handling of pedophile priests. As a straight, cis, white male I have rarely had to deal with identity-based prejudice. However, my mother, as a Jewish woman interested in medicine in the late 1940's, had to deal with frank, institutional antisemitism. Indeed, as I discovered from Dr. Kirschstein after my parents had passed on, she and her husband were close friends of my parents during medical school, drawn together by their common experience of antisemitism, among other factors. Antisemitism and other hateful attitudes and acts have no place in our society. But, you cannot convince me that this is the actual motivation for the use of NIH funding as a weapon is concern about antisemitism and, even if it were, this use of NIH funding would be completely inappropriate.

I hope you will learn more about NIH programs and their histories and will be able to move beyond vague talking points, embarrassing yourself and the agency that matters so much to the American people.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director NIGMS, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Genders and USAID in Bangladesh

Background

Director Bhattacharya cited the fact that USAID had worked to add a third gender to the census in Bangladesh as an example of agencies not focusing of their mission and getting too deeply in politics. This follows from an early Executive Order about gender ideology that was offensive to me, as it tried to assert that gender did not exist and sex was binary with some truly odd definitions.

As it happened, I had become rather familiar with the concept of intersex people by virtue of personal encounters and the fact that one of the early candidate genes for the “testis determining factor” was one of the zinc finger proteins to be identified relatively early. This turned out to be incorrect. I also had learned about gender and intersex people in India from a friend.

I decided to write to Director Bhattacharya to try to encourage him, once again, to get his scientific facts straight and to be less dismissive of other human beings for no good reason.

In drafting this note, I came up with an analogy which may be useful, namely handedness. I write left-handed. I don't know why. In kindergarten and first grade, we had scissors, red handles for right-handed people and green handles for lefties. But the green handled scissors were very dull. I imagine that this was to encourage kids to use their right (as opposed to correct) hand. It didn't work for me; I just learned to use the red handled scissors. Neurodevelopment is complicated and handedness has only a relatively small heritability. This struck me as a way of conveying why some people might feel that their assigned genders might not fit.

Thu, Jul 24, 7:38 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

I understand you have made statements about the dangers of supporting policies such as the inclusion of a third gender option on the census in Bangladesh. You appear to be portraying this as some recent "woke" political agenda. You may or may not be aware that intersex people or individuals who identify as a third gender (called hijra) go back nearly 2000 years in south Asia. These individuals and communities were banned and stigmatized during British colonial rule. This policy was reversed in 2013 and appears to have had positive effects on these human beings as documented in the attached paper.

The Executive Order on "gender ideology" (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>) speaks of "immutable biological classification". Are you aware that approximately 1.7% of people show intersex characteristics? Further, we certainly do not understand the biological basis of gender identity. The transgender people I know or have known have told me that they do not understand why they have the feelings that they have. This does not, in any way, diminish the reality of these feelings.

Although it is not a perfect analogy, I do not understand why I write left-handed. This was certainly not the socially acceptable thing to do when I started school. My parents decided that I was left-handed and the first baseball glove they gave me was for lefties. But throwing right-handed felt much more natural to me. I don't understand any of this, but empirical studies would demonstrate that my feelings reflect my abilities.

I urge you to avoid labelling issues as "political" without first understanding the historical, cultural, and biological aspects of them. Moreover, it would be best to worry less about majority beliefs about the issues and concentrate more on the human beings who actually have to live these realities.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

Attachments

I did not receive any response.

Health Disparities and “DEI”

Background

On Sunday, July 27th, Office of Management and Budget Director Russ Vought appeared on many of the morning news shows. His comments were distressing on many topics including a comment about NIH where he said, “You have an entire institute that does nothing more than DEI research at the NIH.” Vought was referring to the National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities. This caught my ear because the Administration including Director Bhattacharya use the term “DEI” without ever defining or deconstructing it and conflate this with health disparities research.

Director Bhattacharya had started a podcast series called “The Director’s Desk” when he interviews NIH staff members.

I wrote to Director Bhattacharya later that day.

Jul 27, 2025, 3:29 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I know you have spoken on several occasions about your commitment to studies of health disparities and finding effective ways to address them. You have noted your own research on "vulnerable populations". You have also expressed opposition to "DEI" although, to my knowledge, you have never defined what you mean by this term.

One of your bosses, OMB Director Russ Vought, said today (in an interview with Jake Tapper) that "You have an entire institute that does nothing more than DEI research at the NIH." Apparently, he believes that "DEI" and health disparities research are synonymous. This is certainly going to contribute to the confusion that NIH staff, the scientific community, and the public have about the position(s) of the administration on these issues.

Perhaps you should devote your next "Director's Corner" podcast to an interview with National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities Director Eliseo Pérez-Stable to clarify these issues and your position(s) on them.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS (2003-2011)

After sending the email, I remembered that HHS has reassigned NIMHD Director Eliseo Pérez-Stable as part of a purge of five institute directors. I corrected my error in a subsequent email and suggested that he host the acting Director of NIMHD Monica Hooper.

Jul 27, 2025, 3:44 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I had forgotten that HHS had reassigned Dr. Pérez-Stable (for no obvious reason). Perhaps you should invite Dr. Monica Hooper for your podcast.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS (2003-2011)

I did not receive a response to either email.

The Bethesda Declaration and Clinical Trials

Background

On July 29th, Director Bhattacharya appeared on The Federal Drive with Terry Gerton. During this interview, he discussed (among other topics) some of his reactions to the Bethesda Declaration and his meeting. As I listened to this interview, I was struck by his certainty that clinical trials associated with terminated grants had been closed down properly and was dismissive about any knowledge that program officers who had signed the Bethesda Declaration might have.

I knew from my experience as a department chair, institute director, and Editor-in-Chief that is important, indeed essential, that a leader should take care to make sure that s/he is hearing from folks working “in the trenches” and should absolutely take what they say seriously. It is so easy to become isolated and not know what is actually going on in your organization.

I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to suggest that share this insight with him.

Thu, Jul 31, 1:01 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I have listened to some of your recent interview (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2025/07/the-director-of-the-nih-on-growing-controversy-over-grant-terminations-the-bethesda-declaration-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-america-healthy/>) where you discuss your interactions with some of the signers of the Bethesda Declaration.

In this interview, you say "...They're colleagues of mine, I don't report to them. If there is other stuff that they're seeing they want to talk about, you know, my door's open. But they're not auditing me, we're colleagues working together."

It seems that they are offering issues that they do want to talk about and you would benefit from listening to them and not asserting that they "just got flat wrong" on important issues without more extensive discussion and analysis.

You say "Even when a study is disrupted for whatever reason, for instance if a clinical trial is shut down, the researchers that are doing the study have the resources they need to shut it down in an orderly way, find alternative care arrangements with the patients. That's actually just part of what we do at the NIH. And that's exactly what's happened for any of the studies that have been shut down."

Many of the signers of the Bethesda Declaration are program officers who are in direct contact with the investigators who are dealing with these grant terminations. They are worth listening to if you want to know the facts.

As you may or may not know, I was a department chair at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine for 12 years and Editor-in-Chief of Science magazine for 3 1/2 years, in addition to my 7 1/2 years as an NIH Institute Director. One lesson that I learned throughout these leadership positions is that you should take seriously concerns raised by those in the trenches making the organizations function. If a concern was raised, I would look into the concern in a serious way to find out what the facts truly were and to shape my response. While it is tempting to say "That is not what is happening because that is not what I intended". You may be familiar with an old saying about where roads paved with good intentions lead.

You should be thankful that you have staff members who care enough about the organization that you are charged to lead to raise their concerns and who have placed their trust in you by raising important issues. You would serve your organization, yourself, and the American people by taking these concerns with all the seriousness you can muster.

Let me close by noting that you said above that "you don't report to them." I would note that both you and they do report to me and to other taxpayers.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg

I did not receive any response.

In the same interview, Director Bhattacharya commented on grant terminations. In this discussion, he made a number of statements that were demonstrably false. I found his cavalier attitude about grant terminations and facts quite concerning. Moreover, he put forward the administration's pretext that their attacks on universities using federal funding as leverage was based on genuine concern about antisemitism.

I wrote him a follow-up to my previous email.

Thu, Jul 31, 9:43 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

In your interview (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2025/07/the-director-of-the-nih-on-growing-controversy-over-grant-terminations-the-bethesda-declaration-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-america-healthy/>), you said

"So first, it's not true that billions of dollars of grants were terminated. That's an exaggeration. The other thing is that there's sort of several buckets of things. So one is — you probably saw today, this is news — that the administration came to terms with Columbia University, which had basically violated civil rights laws extensively.

According to the HHS TAGGS site (<https://taggs.hhs.gov/>), the total of unexpended balances of the NIH grants that have been terminated is \$550 M (spreadsheet attached). These are formally terminated grants. This does not include "paused" grants at Columbia, Harvard, Brown, Cornell, and Cornell Weill Medical School nor the large amount of funding that has been withheld from Northwestern University (and perhaps others institutions) through blocking payments at the level of the Payment Management System. Since you note the involvement of "several buckets", it does not seem that several billions of dollars is an exaggeration.

You go on to say that "the administration came to terms with Columbia University, which had basically violated civil rights laws extensively. And so Columbia basically admitted that, they're going to pay a fine to the federal government for having done this, and then adopted policies to no longer violate civil rights laws."

This statement is factually incorrect in several ways and reflects a lack of knowledge of or concern for the Constitution that you swore to protect and defend.

You claim that Columbia University basically violated civil rights laws. To my knowledge, Columbia has not been charged with violating any specific civil rights laws. Thus, your statement that they "basically violated civil rights laws" is without any factual basis. Moreover, even if that had been charged with such violations, this would not mean that they had, in fact, violated those laws. The 5th and 14th amendments to our Constitution both address the fact that "No person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law". Thus, "pausing" grants as a way to address uncharged violations runs the risk of being unconstitutional.

You also say that "Columbia basically admitted that". The agreement is publicly available (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/07/24/nyregion/columbia-trump-deal.html>)

This begins with a statement that "The Agreement is not an admission in whole or in part by either party, and Columbia expressly denies liability regarding the United States' allegations or findings."

Thus, your statement that "Columbia basically admitted that" is, to use your term, flat wrong.

The civil rights violations you alleged presumably involve charges of antisemitism. As someone of Jewish descent, I find the pretext of antisemitism for this government behavior that borders on extortion to be offensive and disgusting.

I know you have spent your entire educational career at Stanford University. If you were still there, you might benefit from the course History 33Q (co-listed with the Jewish Studies department).

HISTORY 33Q: Stanford Confronts the Fascist Moment (JEWISHST 33Q)

What made fascism so attractive and so powerful in 20th century Europe and throughout the world? How did the Stanford community respond to this political ideology that burst onto the scene in the 1920s and engulfed the world in war in the 1940s? Could fascism have another "moment" - in the present or in the future? Students will consider these and other questions in this course, which will discuss the various definitions and theories of fascism and the major fascist movements of the interwar period (primarily Italian Fascism and German Nazism), as well as how the Stanford community responded to them. The course will not just focus on the military and political aspects of fascism, as is traditionally taught, but also social and cultural aspects of fascism, as well. We'll also consider how different groups experienced and reacted to fascism, based on racial background, religious affiliation, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This discussion-based course will also include hands-on archival work in Stanford Special Collections and Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

I know that you have expressed deep concern about politics entering into NIH funding. I do hope that you will do everything in your power to prevent funding for biomedical research through NIH from being used as political leverage against universities in the future and will try to get your facts right, especially when you make public statements.

Facts really do matter.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I have received no response.

COVID Origins

Background

Director Bhattacharya and others in the Administration have been using the origin as a cudgel against NIH and others in the scientific community. I have found this behavior quite concerning because the accusations are quite serious and the evidence for them is very weak. In particular, they have framed the question as a binary choice between “lab leak” and zoonotic transmission in the “wet market” in Wuhan. However, “lab leak” encompasses two quite different events: (1) the leak of an engineered strain of coronavirus generated by “gain-of-function” research, perhaps supported by NIH; or (2) the accidental leak of a natural coronavirus under study at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. There is substantial evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is not an engineered virus, largely ruling out (1).

Even though I was reluctant to wade into this fraught topic, I decided that I had to write to Director Bhattacharya about these issues.

Fri, Aug 1, 5:01 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

On a number of occasions, you have made comments about your views of the likely origins of the COVID pandemic including strong statements that NIH is likely responsible for this pandemic which led to the deaths of millions of people around the globe. In your recent interview (<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2025/07/the-director-of-the-nih-on-growing-controversy-over-grant-terminations-the-bethesda-declaration-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-america-healthy/>), you weighed in on this issue again. You said:

It's a real possibility that the COVID pandemic was caused in part by, very likely, by an unintentional lab leak for a research program aimed at ending all pandemics.

This statement contains several qualifiers that are self-contradictory..."real possibility", "in part", "very likely"

The origin of the COVID pandemic is, in fact, a scientific question, albeit a challenging one. If one were going to write an NIH proposal to approach this question (which would probably be deemed to be outside "agency priorities" at this point), here are some aims that would be included:

- (1) Is there any evidence that SARS-CoV-2 was the product of engineering rather than being a naturally occurring virus?
- (2) Is there clear evidence that viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 were present at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV)?
- (3) Is there clear evidence that viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 were present at the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market?
- (4) Where and when did the first cases of COVID appear?
- (5) Are there animals that can be identified that form a chain of transition for SARS-CoV-2 from bats to animals?

Let us consider these aims in turn.

(1) The answer to this is NO. Initially, there was some attention drawn to a cleavage site for the protease furin (with the amino sequence Pro-Arg-Arg-Ala) that is encoded within the SARS-CoV-2 genome that is not found in some other coronaviruses. However, subsequent analysis reveals that this site is, in fact, found in other betacoronaviruses and the details of this amino acid sequence and the RNA sequence that encodes it are not consistent with intentional manipulation.

(2) The answer to this question is NO. While there are certainly coronaviruses under study at WIV, no virus has been identified with a nucleotide sequence of the initial SARS-CoV-2 isolates. Of course, the absence of evidence is not powerful evidence of absence and the Chinese have certainly not been as forthcoming as one would like, but it is important to note that no evidence exists at this point.

(3) The answer to this question is NO. Although other coronaviruses were found in the environmental samples at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, none of them are closely related to SARS-CoV-2.

(4) The first identified cases of COVID occurred in December 2019 in Wuhan. These cases are cluster around the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market which is 12 kilometers and across the Yangtze River from WIV. These data have been analyzed, and the underlying data are available. These data are much more consistent with the Seafood market being the source of SARS-CoV-2 than WIV. As an aside, recall that the assessment of the geographical distribution of cases of cholera in London in 1854 provided strong evidence for the germ theory of disease (rather than the miasma theory occasionally cited by Secretary Kennedy) and was a landmark in public health and statistics.

(5) The events by which SARS-CoV-2 or its proximal ancestor transitioned from bats to another intermediate host species are unknown.

Regarding transition from an unknown animal host to humans: There were two lineages of SARS-CoV-2 present at the market. If these two lineages diverged in humans, as would be expected if this was the result of a single introduction resulting from an accidental lab-acquired infection, we would likely find transitional genomes among the sequenced human cases. If these two lineages diverged in wildlife at or prior to the market, we would not find these transitional genomes since the animals were not directly sampled. A recent analysis showed that there was no evidence of intermediate or transitional genomes, which is

consistent with divergence prior to establishment of sustained transmission in the human population and emergence at the market.

I hypothesize from your equivocation in your statement about the origins of the COVID pandemic that your training as a scientist who depends on evidence is in conflict with your political needs to support a theory that has little or no evidence to support it and is being pushed by the administration in which you serve in deeply irresponsible ways such as the truly horrifying update to the COVID website (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/lab-leak-true-origins-of-covid-19/>).

It is particularly galling when you cite polling that the American public is now substantially distrustful of NIH when you and your colleagues in the administration have been pushing an unsupported theory that NIH basically killed millions of people and contributed to other harms across our nation and the globe. This is truly a case of the arsonist volunteering to join the fire brigade.

Listen to your scientist self and stop being an irresponsible politician.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg

Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

P.S. I attach 8 key papers. You must be deeply familiar with at least two of these papers since you co-signed requests for them to be retracted (without, I note, providing any substantial evidence to back up these requests).

I did not receive a response.

Publication and Retraction Standards

Background

In the course of investigating the COVID origin materials, I discovered that a biochemist whom I know somewhat (Richard Ebright) was a member of an organization called “Biosafety Now”. Director Bhattacharya had been on their Board.

I was thinking about Richard Ebright because the Editor-in-Chief of *Science* had recently announced a new policy which I think is extremely problematic. He decided to retract a controversial paper from 2010 about the growth of a bacterium in very harsh conditions including very high concentration of arsenic salts and the possible incorporation of arsenic in place of phosphorous in DNA. This paper had been controversial since the moment it was published and *Science* had published many technical comments. I had thought that I would retract the paper when I became Editor-in-Chief, but then read the paper and realized that the data looked okay (but certainly not perfect) and their interpretation had been largely overblown by an initial press conference and the media. I decided that retracting a paper because the interpretation was wrong but the data seemed okay and were not fraudulent or otherwise ethically flawed would be a dangerous and unsustainable precedent. This was especially true since nothing had changed since the paper was published. If *Science* did not think the evidence was adequate, then they should not have published the paper in the first place, but that ship had sailed.

I was trying to think of examples of other papers that first the same pattern. I recalled that Richard Ebright had published a paper as an undergraduate at Harvard that fit the bill. This paper, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences with one other author, also an undergraduate, proposed a novel mechanism for a bacterial DNA-binding gene regulatory protein. This paper got a ton of publicity at Harvard and caught my attention since I was moving into this field for my postdoc. It seemed fanciful and not well supported by the data when I first read it, but it was thought provoking. It was shown to be wrong within a year by a more definitive experiment from another group.

I defended Richard Ebright on Bluesky, saying that it would be, in my view, a mistake to retract this paper even if the interpretation was completely wrong. The data were fine and the interpretation was not impossible, just wrong.

I discovered that Biosafety Now, including Ebright and Bhattacharya, had called for retraction of two *Science* papers about COVID origins for vague reasons. It seemed to me

that their major objection to these papers were the conclusions, namely that evidence was more consistent with the Wuhan wet markets being the source of SARS-CoV-2 than with the Wuhan Institute of Virology being the source.

Bhattacharya had published a research paper estimating infection rates very early in the COVID pandemic. This study was criticized immediately over experimental, ethical, and statistical issues. Moreover, Bhattacharya and the first author on the paper published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal anticipating the results before the study was even initiated.

I felt that I should point out the inconsistency in Director Bhattacharya's approach to the integrity of the scientific literature.

Aug 4, 2025, 12:40 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

Because of a recent policy change at *Science* magazine, the topic of when it is appropriate to retract scientific articles is being actively discussed. I noticed that you seem to have rather wide-ranging views on the subject.

Based on your affiliation with the group Biosafety Now, you called for retraction of two *Science* articles about COVID because they were “scientifically unsound” based on a number of claims (<https://biosafetynow.substack.com/p/covid-origins-worobey-et-al-2022>).

However, you presumably stand by your own paper (<https://academic.oup.com/ije/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/ije/dyab010>) on COVID even though concerns were raised immediately about failure to appropriately account for uncertainty properly that could invalidate the conclusions (<https://medium.com/@balajis/peer-review-of-covid-19-antibody-seroprevalence-in-santa-clara-county-california-1f6382258c25>).

Moreover, it was subsequently reported (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemlee/stanford-coronavirus-study-bhattacharya-email>) that your wife sent out an inappropriate email recruiting students from your children’s school to the study. You clearly found this concerning as you are quoted as saying “The email you reference was sent out without my permission or my knowledge or the permission of the research team”. You do describe attempts to correct for these biases in recruitment in the supplementary material, but do not acknowledge that this email was sent by the spouse of one of the paper’s authors.

Moreover, the email referenced an op-ed authored by the first author and yourself in the *Wall Street Journal* (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-the-coronavirus-as-deadly-as-they-say-11585088464>) entitled “Is the Coronavirus as Deadly as They Say? Current estimates about the Covid-19 fatality rate may be too high by orders of magnitude.” published just before the initiation of the study. This could certainly affect the people who volunteered to participate and suggests strongly that the authors of the paper had a strong bias about the anticipated (and desired) results of the study and their implications.

Finally, support for the study was from the “Stanford COVID19 Seroprevalence Studies Fund” with no indication of who actually provided the funding, either there or online, as far as I have been able to discern. It might as well be called the “The people who paid for this study” fund; This is not exactly an informative disclosure.

As you are currently in a taxpayer-funded government position with considerable responsibility and power, and are currently weighing in on a range of issues related to publication practices, perhaps you would consider reconciling your different positions on these papers.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg

Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive any response.

The importance of evidence

Background

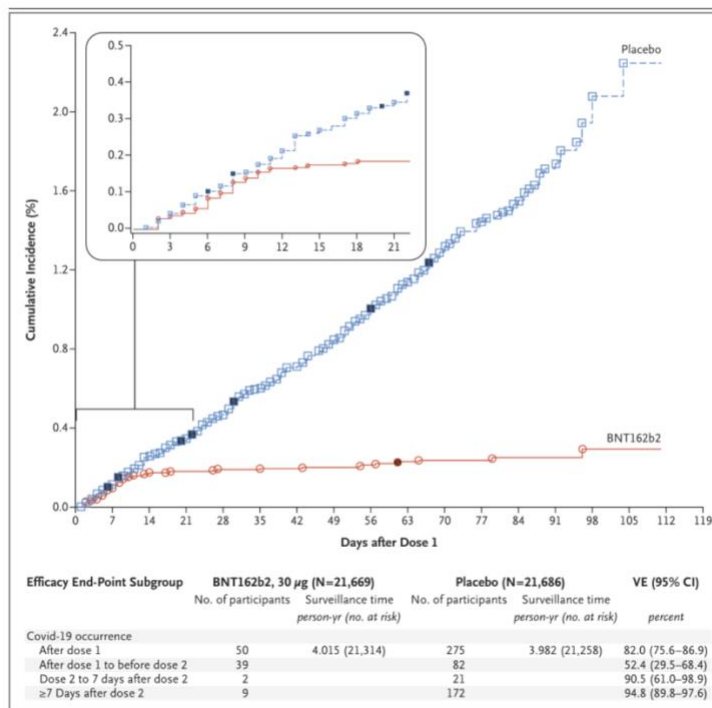
Director Bhattacharya appeared on “The War Room” with Steve Bannon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB0H2JPGIk>). After trying to get over my reaction to the fact that Bhattacharya often complains about the politization of NIH while spending his valuable time on a clearly partisan, political podcast, I listened to the discussion. Bhattacharya discussed COVID vaccines, making the point that they were no longer useful because of a lack of public trust in them. Of course, he had contributed substantially to encouraging this lack of trust. He concluded “when people distrust a product or technology like that, the only way forward is to be honest about what you know and what you don’t know, and give excellent evidence and be honest with people.” I decided that I needed to write to him to call him out on the misinformation he was spreading and to use his standard to evaluate his performance as NIH Director as I increasingly distrusted his leadership.

Mon, Aug 11, 3:56 PM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya:

I have listened to your performance on the “War Room” podcast with Steve Bannon. The segment begins with a discussion of Secretary Kennedy’s recent cancellation of \$500M worth of contracts related to mRNA vaccines.

You say “You can’t have a platform where such a large percentage of the population distrusts the platform as we use it for vaccines and expect it to work.” Later, you make comments that might explain why a large segment of the percentage distrusts this platform. For example, you say that the vaccine was not protective against contracting COVID and cite your own case on COVID after being vaccinated. However, you fail to cite the evidence for the clinical trials that led to the Emergency Use Authorization.



This is a figure from the trial for BNT162b2 vaccine candidate showing COVID cases for vaccine versus placebo. This is truly impressive efficacy, estimated at 95%. However, this stacks up well against any vaccine ever developed. If this is accurate, does this mean that some people who have been vaccinated will contract COVID (such as yourself). Statistically, of course, they will, and this does not represent any evidence of anything.

Later, you say that you don’t know how many premature deaths were prevented by COVID vaccines, but you believe that the published numbers are too high. You repeatedly make comments about the need to use credible evidence but then you fail to produce any. Your former Stanford colleague John Ioannidis, whose work you have cited, recently published a paper concluding that only 2.5 million premature deaths were prevented. Even if you accept this figure without serious comparison to

other studies, 2.5 million deaths is larger than most public health interventions. There are also meta-analyses of the many studies that have been published that provide more robust estimates.

Steve Bannon describes mRNA vaccine technology as “experimental gene therapy”. You don’t correct him that mRNA vaccines are not “gene therapy” and, importantly, they do not alter a person’s DNA in any way. You could have said, “Steve, let me stop you there. While I have reservations about mRNA technology, it is important for your listeners to know that these mRNA vaccines are not ‘gene therapy’ and they do not alter one’s DNA.” That might have actually helped educate the public, rather than leaving them susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. I am assuming (and hoping) that you know about this distinction yourself.

You say later that the mRNA platform suffers from defects including uncertainty about the antigen dose, antigen distribution, and the production of off-target proteins. Can you provide evidence for these concerns? Although I have not done an exhaustive literature search, I have not been able to find any sources that provide credible evidence that these are factors that affect mRNA vaccines efficacy or side-effect profiles. If these are legitimate concerns, perhaps you should encourage studies to investigate them rather than concluding that the “mRNA platform is no longer viable.” If only you oversaw an organization devoted to funding and performing biomedical research...

You support Secretary Kennedy’s decision to cancel \$500 M worth of contracts because you claim that “you can’t have a platform where such a large percentage of the population distrusts the platform...”. You go on to say “when people distrust a product or technology like that, the only way forward is to be honest about what you know and what you don’t know, and give excellent evidence and be honest with people.”

Here is some excellent evidence that I can honestly share with people about your performance as NIH Director.

(1) You are either intellectually lazy or dishonest about many topics.

Evidence: At your confirmation hearing, you described indirect costs as “a kind of a tip” and said you did know now how they were derived. I would have thought that someone preparing for a Senate confirmation hearing for an incredibly important position would have at least done the work to learn about an issue that was almost certain to come up. In addition, as a PhD economist, I would have thought, you would be interested to learn about this issue from the hundreds of people, both inside and outside of Stanford, who would have been glad to explain how indirect cost rates are derived.

Evidence: You have supported termination of grants directed towards studying the health of transsexual people based, in large part, on the Executive Order “Defending Women...” (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>). This Executive Order is full of declarative statements without any evidence or support. For example, it states that “It is the policy of the United

States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality.” I previously sent you a copy of Ben Barres’s “Autobiography of a Transgender Science” and I hope you have found time to read it. If you have, then you would know that Ben was raised as a female named Barbara, but always felt more like a boy. Ben later discovered that he had Müllerian agenesis and lack a uterus and a vagina. These “defects” were surgically addressed, but this did not change Ben’s feelings about this gender. This is just one example from a courageous person who shared intimate details about himself. But it would be more appropriate to be honest and humble enough to say that we don’t understand the neurobiology of gender identity and not promote dogmatic statements that are, in fact, not supported by science.

(2) You are deeply hypocritical.

Evidence: You often complain about being misunderstood and questioned regarding your intentions, yet you often question other people’s intentions, in addition to their actions. On the recent podcast, you make comments about why various people were so passionate about promoting COVID vaccines. You suggest that some people are motivated by their desire to control others and to “get their way” rather than by more noble motivations. You seem to ignore the possibility that health care and public health professionals might have been strongly motivated by, for example, personally treating COVID patients or the horrors of the COVID outbreak in New York City in March through May 2020 that threatened the entire city health system. A family friend of ours who worked for the city health department was re-tasked to sourcing body bags and refrigerated trucks. It also appears that you recently suggested that the authors of the Bethesda Declaration were motivated by animosity toward you personally rather than by sincere concerns about the NIH.

Evidence: You express concern about the lack of “gold standard science” with good experimental designs, good control over sources of bias, and high likelihood of being reproducible. Yet, you performed a study directed toward determining the true SARS-CoV-2 infection rate in Santa Clara county that we immediately criticized (with clear justification) regarding the population sampling, the measurement tools, and the statistical analysis. You clearly had a desired outcome based on political rather than scientific considerations, and you and the first author chose to publish an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal interpreting the likely outcome even before the study was initiated. You exercised such poor control over the study that your spouse violated the participant recruitment protocol. Surely, this is not close to anything resembling “gold standard science” by anyone’s definition. You frequently complain about the politicization of science by members of the scientific community and NIH staff who are concerned about the termination of grants about what you term without definition “DEI” and other considerations while you and the administration that appointed you are moving to dramatically increase political control in place of the scientific considerations that have largely governed NIH since its creation. Indeed, your very appearance on this political podcast with a host who does not appear to know much about biomedical research reveals a striking politicization of science.

(3) You do not seem to have a command about what is going on in your own agency.

Evidence: You stated on a podcast that you were interested in the idea of NIH supporting selected early-stage investigators amply to allow them to attack important problems and said you would “definitely look into it to figure out how to do this in an NIH context.” You clearly did not know about the “NIH Director’s New Innovator Award” program, run out of your own office yet still felt comfortable making these public comments. I found it embarrassing to NIH and would have found it personally embarrassing had I revealed such ignorance in public.

Evidence: You claimed that “structural racism” was not a concept that could be studied scientifically and used this for justification of termination of specific grants and then claimed that studies of “redlining” would be an appropriate topic for study without knowing that some of the terminated grants did, in fact, study the health impacts of redlining. More recently, you have claimed that you had directed that no lists of “forbidden words” should be used to screen grants. However, there is ample evidence that this practice has never stopped, and it appears that at least one system that implements it is run in your office of Extramural Research.

Based on the distrust that many members of the scientific community, both outside and inside NIH, have for you and this honest evidence that I have tried to provide, the recently established precedent would suggest that Secretary Kennedy should conclude that your leadership of NIH is no longer viable.

With as much respect as I can muster,

Jeremy M. Berg

Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive any response.

NIH Priorities

Background

On August 15th, Director Bhattacharya communicated with NIH leadership and then released a public statement about NIH priorities with the title “Advancing NIH’s Mission Through a Unified Strategy” (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-director/statements/advancing-nihs-mission-through-unified-strategy>). I was disconcerted that this “unified strategy” was almost entirely focused on controversial topics including those topics that had been subject to grant terminations and did not reflect any other key topics such as, for example, balancing disease prevention versus early detection versus treatment. I felt obliged to write to Bhattacharya to point out how this was not a unified strategy and that there was a huge body of literature about effective planning including, more importantly, outreach to a range of stakeholders.

Aug 16, 2025, 7:18 AM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: I was alarmed but, sadly, not the least bit surprised, by the release of the “Advancing NIH’s Mission Through a Unified Strategy” statement (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-director/statements/advancing-nih-mission-through-unified-strategy>) yesterday. I realize that you have never directed a large organization before so you may not understand the benefits of having a more structured planning process with extensive opportunities for input from stakeholders (and NIH has many different ones). I attach a pdf of a book that I find useful for laying out information about strategic planning and priority setting, “Managing Priorities: How to Create Better Plans and Make Smarter Decisions” by Harry Max. I would be glad to send you a hard copy if you would prefer that. Please let me know.

You might also benefit from reading more about the ineffectiveness of central planning by a small group without stakeholder benefit. The Internet Archive has a copy of “The Myth of the Plan: The Lessons of the Soviet Planning Experience” (<https://archive.org/details/mythofplanle00ruti/page/n9/mode/2up>). I am finding the Internet Archive to be especially valuable as government websites are disappearing in the name of efficiency and “radical transparency”.

There are many other good books about effective planning and priority setting; Well run organizations depend on this. Do let me know if you would like a hard copy of Harry Max’s book or a selection of some others.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Transgender Studies and Academic Freedom

Background

In the cover letter to the NIH priorities document “Advancing NIH’s Mission Through a Unified Strategy” (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-director/statements/advancing-nih-mission-through-unified-strategy>) that was sent to NIH institute and center directors and other leaders, Director Bhattacharya included a statement about how much he values academic freedom, stating that “scientists must be allowed to pursue their ideas free of censorship or control by others”. However, the document itself had a section on transgender health that asserted a dogmatic view about what studies were going to be allowed based on a recent, unsigned, non-peer reviewed report from the Department of Health and Human Services. This inconsistency (actually, frank hypocrisy) was striking to me. His claims of support for academic freedom rang hollow when, in the same document, he asserted dogmatic views from the government about what could or could not be studies (at least with NIH support). I wrote to him again a couple of hours after my previous email.

Sat, Aug 16, 10:39 AM

Dear Dr. Bhattacharya: As a follow-up to my earlier email, I am having trouble reconciling your statement in the cover letter sent to NIH staff. You said:

“I have advocated for academic freedom throughout my career, with a particular public focus in the last five years. My position has not changed; scientists must be allowed to pursue their ideas free of censorship or control by others. They must be able to express their scientific opinions and challenge scientific dogma. This does not mean everything scientists want to do can or will be funded, but rather that they will be free to propose and discuss these ideas freely in public scientific debate.”

Yet, the document itself says:

“The state of the scientific literature regarding optimal care and support approaches for children and teenagers identifying as transgender and those diagnosed with gender dysphoria is described in the recent HHS review of treatment for pediatric gender dysphoria. In accordance with these data, there are clearly more promising avenues of research that can be taken to improve the health of these populations than to conduct studies that involve the use of puberty suppression, hormone therapy, or surgical intervention to treat gender dysphoria, gender identity disorder, or gender incongruence in minors. By contrast, research that aims to identify and treat the harms these therapies and procedures have potentially caused to minors diagnosed with gender dysphoria, gender identity disorder, or gender incongruence, and how to best address the needs of these individuals so that they may live long, healthy lives is more promising.”

This seems an awful lot like promoting scientific dogma. Of course, this is predicted on the “HHS review of treatment for pediatric gender dysphoria” (<https://opa.hhs.gov/gender-dysphoria-report>). It is completely reasonable for scientists to be skeptical of this report since it was released on May 1st, 2025 whereas the Executive Order “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>) was issued on January 20th, 2025. You, yourself, responded to one of my earlier emails describing some terminated research as “ideological boondoggles”. You used this term vaguely so I can’t be sure that you were referring to transgender health, but it seemed that way to me.

The HHS review revealed that many studies were excluded for a range of reasons. This further adds to concern about bias. Did you seek opinions on this report from NIH staff members who have worked with transgender community members and their advocates or were you comfortable that the authors of the HHS report (who, as far as I can tell, are never identified in the report) has presented a fair assessment of the state of scientific knowledge. Did you review the National Academies webinar “Advancing the Well Being of LGBTQI+ Populations” (<https://www.nationalacademies.org/event/06-07->

[2021/advancing-the-well-being-of-lgbtqi-plus-populations](#)). One of the speakers was Dr. Karen Parker who, I believe, still works in the Office of the Director at NIH. She was formerly Director of the Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office before this was disbanded during this administration.

It would be helpful to understand what is driving this dogmatic approach to an important health issue. Is this driven by people in the administration who get the “ick” from trans people? Is it driven by parents who are disappointed and concerned about their children who express uncertainty about their genders? I know that Elon Musk has disowned this trans daughter and blamed her status on “woke” but I don’t believe that Elon Musk’s approach to his children (perhaps more accurately, progeny) and his families should serve as a model for anything. I understand that there are legitimate concerns for surgery in minors, given that surgery is difficult to reverse. However, grouping this together with puberty blockers (which are reversible) seems problematic. You know what else is difficult to reverse: child suicide.

All of this relates to clinical practice rather than research. It is impossible for me to square your claims of strong support for academic freedom when you are suppressing research that could provide information about the benefits and problems with any treatments. This is made worse by your support for research “to identify and treat the harms these therapies and procedures have potentially caused to minors diagnosed with gender dysphoria, gender identity disorder, or gender incongruence.” You are clearly steering research to support one policy outcome over others. This is not academic freedom. This is authoritarian control over the generation of information.

I don’t know if you have ever interacted with any trans people. You might find it enlightening. Their life experiences are probably quite different from yours and I always find engaging with such people to this enriching.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg

Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

The Anti-Science Actions of President Donald Trump and Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

Background

I saw a video clip of an interview that Director Bhattacharya did with the “Technology Policy Institute”. It struck that he seemed to dismiss the unprecedented turmoil that had been unleashed on the scientific community as “transition stuff”, suggesting that the actions that had occurred since January 20th were normal changes that happened when the administration transitions. This reflected either ignorance (I would say willful ignorance) or gaslighting. In any case, it reflected an unwellness to hold the administration or himself accountable for their actions. I felt I had to call him out on this.

Aug 18, 2025, 4:32 PM

Dr. Bhattacharya:

I saw a clip of your interview with “Technology Policy Institute”. You stated, “There's a faction of people who have been trying to essentially paint Donald Trump and Bobby Kennedy as anti-science and they have used transition stuff that has happened at the NIH to cause political turmoil.”

What “transition stuff” are you referring to?

Proposing a 40% cut to the NIH appropriation and a 59% cut to the NSF appropriation?

Using funding of scientific research in a manner that is almost certainly illegal to extort concessions from universities?

Converting legitimate and important discussions about vaccine safety into vacuous political discussions by giving credence to studies such as that linking the MMR vaccine to autism that was fraudulent, retracted, and likely motivated by financial interests, rather than concerns about the health of children?

Transforming legitimate concerns about additives in processed food into fear about anything with a chemical name by citing for example, the inclusion of “riboflavin” (also known as vitamin B-2), a chemical essential for many biochemical processes.

Apparently misleading Republicans in the Senate about intentions to fire qualified members of advisory boards?

Terminating grants in a manner that has been deemed to be illegal by a respected judge appointed by Ronald Reagan? Doing this without understanding what is actually in the grants that some terminations were reversed but not without damage to on-going research programs including, yes, clinical trials?

I could go on...

I don't know if you are including me in the “faction” of people painting the President and Secretary Kennedy as anti-science. Regardless of whether this is true or not, I can assure you that my interests are entirely patriotic, trying to preserve the NIH and other science agencies that have done so much for the American people and on which our people depend going into a very challenging future.

I still feel the awesome sense of responsibility I felt when I became NIGMS Director. I also did my best to be honest with myself, with my NIH colleagues and HHS leadership, with the scientific community, and with the public. I highly recommend focusing on this approach and taking some responsibility for your role and the role of the administration in which you serve in some of the chaos that is threatening to undermine American science.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg

NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Disruptions at the NIH Clinical Center

Background

Director Bhattacharya said on several occasions that no clinical trials were significantly delayed by the actions of the Administration. This statement was contradicted by various reports. On August 21, I became aware of an Instagram post produced by the Washington Post with a late-stage cancer patient at the NIH Clinical Center whose treatment had been detailed by staffing cuts. This disrupted his experimental cancer treatment, threatening to disrupt potential life-extending treatment and decreasing the experimental power of the trial. The included an extensive interview with the patient and his wife and I found it quite compelling. I thought it was important for Director Bhattacharya to be aware of this story so I emailed him and shared the Instagram link and some screen shots.

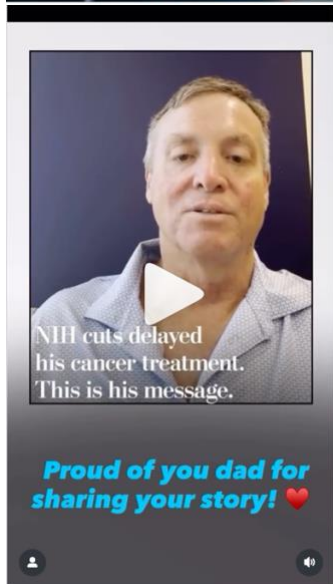
Aug 21, 2025, 9:43 AM

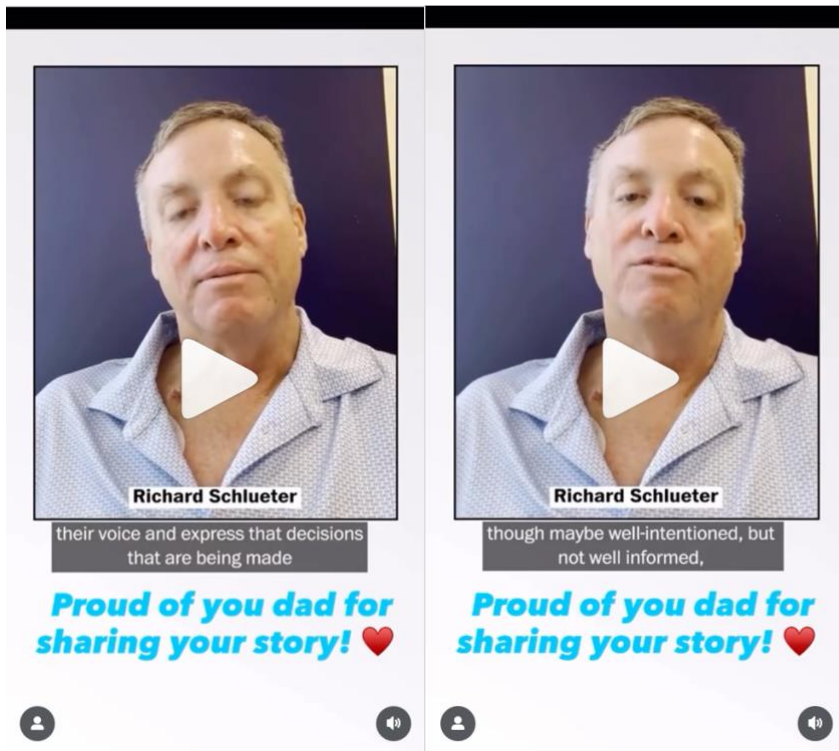
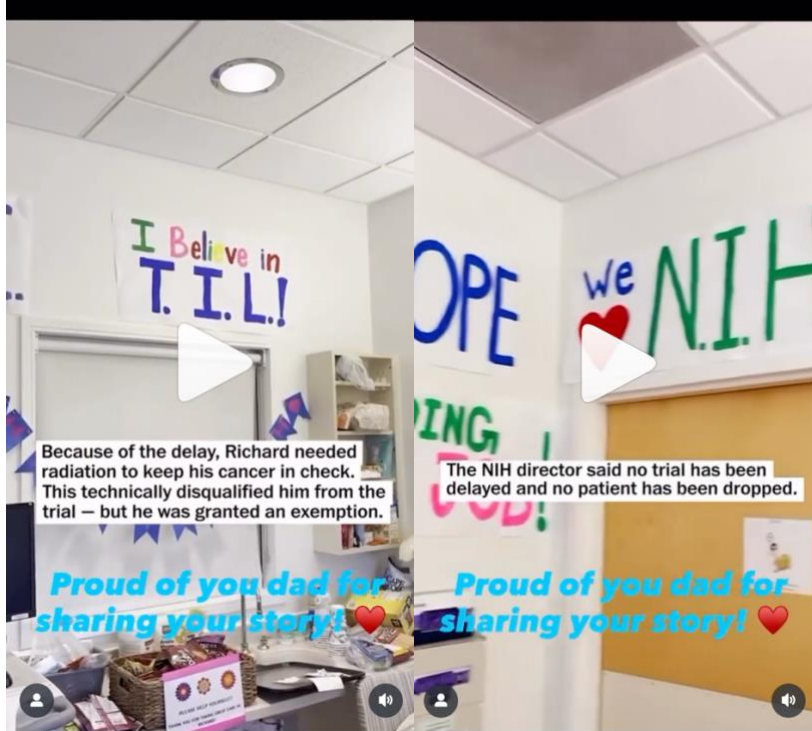
Dear Director Bhattacharya:

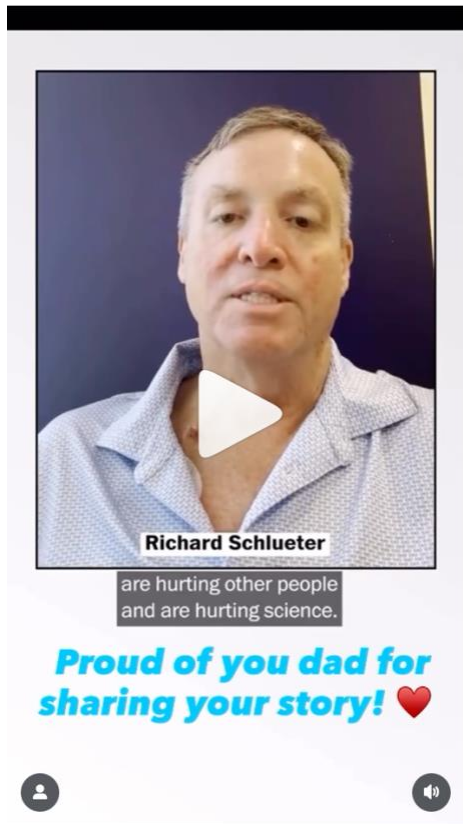
I want to call your attention to this post from a patient treated at the NIH Clinical Center.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNmQXojNa04/>

I realize that you have a busy schedule so I have included some screenshots to help you get this gist of his important message.







Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive any response.

Grant terminations lawsuits and the NIH MOSAIC Scholars program

Background

NIH had terminated hundreds of grants, many because they included components that were characterized as involving “DEI” or other topics that the Administration objected to for ideological reasons. This led to two lawsuits (<https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/69843493/commonwealth-of-massachusetts-v-kennedy-jr/> and <https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/69835536/american-public-health-association-v-national-institutes-of-health/>). These two lawsuits overlapped and were tried together in front of Judge William Young, a 40-year veteran of the federal bench, first appointed by Ronald Reagan. The trial was divided into two parts, the first based around grant terminations. Judge Young ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, finding that the grant terminations had violated the Administrative Procedure Act as they were arbitrary and capricious. He also made a strong statement from the bench saying that he has not seen a worse case on racial discrimination by the federal government.

One of the programs that was affected was the NIH MOSAIC (Maximizing Opportunities for Scientific and Academic Independent Careers) Postdoctoral Career Transition Award program. This program was labelled as a “DEI” program because it provided an opportunity for applicants to express an interest in working on the representation of historically underrepresented groups in the biomedical workforce. This program has supported approximately 200 awardees, some of whom came from racial or ethnic groups historically underrepresented in biomedical research, but also many others who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or had other reasons to be interested in representation issues.

The cases were appealed and eventually ended up being considered by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that the grant terminations were likely illegal but allowed a stay of Judge Young’s ruling requiring grant reinstatement based on court jurisdictional issues. It was (and is) unclear whether NIH will re-terminate some or all of the grants that they had terminated.

I felt that I had to write to Director Bhattacharya and urge him to do the right thing and not re-terminate the grants. I used the MOSAIC program as an example because I felt this program clearly illustrated the flaws in their rationale for grant terminations.

Aug 23, 2025, 11:37 AM

August 23, 2025

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I write to you regarding your plans after the Supreme Court ruling yesterday. As you know, the Supreme Court did allow a stay on the required grant reinstatements based on a controversial jurisdictional issue but also found that the grant termination processes used were likely illegal.

I know you are deeply concerned about public trust in NIH. I hope that you understand that proceeding to fail to reinstate or to re-terminate grants that had been found to have been illegally terminated will not increase the public trust in NIH. This would also be substantially damaging to science.

You have a choice. Your leadership here has the potential to contribute to your legacy as a thoughtful leader who made fair and well-reasoned decisions in a sometimes-fraught political environment.

I know that you have spoken repeatedly about fostering the development of the careers of young scientists. Unfortunately, NIH terminated many grants to early career scientists for reasons that are completely misaligned with your new priorities.

As an example, I would like to focus on one program that was part of the lawsuits. This is the MOSAIC scholars program [Maximizing Opportunities for Scientific and Academic Independent Careers (MOSAIC) Postdoctoral Career Transition Award to Promote Diversity (K99/R00)]. This K99/R00 program was developed to support mentored postdoctoral training and transitions into academic careers for talented early career scientists spanning many of the scientific areas supported by NIH. The MOSAIC program is analogous to other K99/R00 programs except that it is targeted to scientists who have interests in the diversity and representation issues in the biomedical workforce or in service more generally.

Here are some excerpts from some MOSAIC funding opportunity announcements.

Eligible Individuals (Program Director/Principal Investigator)

Any candidate with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to carry out the proposed research as the Program Director/Principal Investigator (PD/PI) is invited to work with their mentor and organization to develop an application for support. Individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups as well as individuals with disabilities, women and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are always encouraged to apply for NIH support. See [NOT-OD-22-019](#) "Reminder: Notice of NIH's Encouragement of Applications Supporting Individuals from

Underrepresented Ethnic and Racial Groups as well as Individuals with Disabilities.”

Program Considerations

Consistent with existing NIH practice and applicable law:

- An applicant organization may not use the race, ethnicity, or sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, or transgender status) of a prospective K99 candidate as an eligibility criteria.
- NIH does not use the race, ethnicity, or sex of a candidate to establish program eligibility, as part of the application review process, or as a factor in making funding decisions.

Other Attachments

Statement on Activities to Promote Broad Participation in Biomedical Research Workforce (Required; 1-page maximum): The application must include a statement from the candidate (i.e., the postdoctoral researcher) describing (a) past and present activities, and (b) future plans as a faculty member to promote broad participation in the biomedical workforce, that is those activities that further and foster inclusive, supportive, and accessible biomedical research environments that support trainees and scientists from all backgrounds, including individuals from underrepresented groups. Highlight activities relevant to addressing underrepresentation within the biomedical research workforce within the United States and territories. Examples can include, but are not limited to:

- Outreach activities to foster awareness of biomedical research training opportunities for potential trainees from all backgrounds.
- Contributions to targeted recruitment activities (such as those to individuals from underrepresented groups) intended to diversify applicant pools for training programs.
- Mentoring or leadership activities in relevant programs or organizations meant to create and sustain inclusive biomedical research and research training environments for scientists and trainees from diverse backgrounds.

Highlight the impact of past and present activities.

Note that this program is completely aligned with your new priorities, to wit:

Training future biomedical scientists:

NIH training programs should focus on training future physicians and scientists to lead American preeminence in biomedical research in the 21st century. Programs should allow trainees to design and conduct the highest quality scientific studies. Importantly, these programs should be based on merit, follow civil rights law, and not discriminate against anyone. NIH and the institutions we support must also uphold safe, equal, and healthy working and learning conditions conducive to high-quality research and free inquiry.

These are real early career scientists, many of whom have had their careers and lives turned upside down by arbitrary and capricious grant terminations. They received their K99/R00 awards through a highly competitive program with no set-aside funds. I show a dare I-say mosaic below with ~1/4 of the MOSAIC scholars to depict what is at risk.



This is an extraordinarily talented and committed group of scientists who have so much to offer to the NIH mission. Indeed, they are among the most impressive groups of young scientists that have encountered in my four decades in biomedical research. I know the Administration would prefer to speak of “DEI” rather than mentioning the individual component words.

Here are some definitions from Dictionary.com

Diversity: The spectrum of individual differences and the corresponding group memberships and identities that human beings have in society.

Equity: The quality of being fair or impartial.

Inclusion: The practice or policy of including and integrating all people and groups in activities, organizations, political processes, etc., especially those who are disadvantaged, have suffered discrimination, or are living with disabilities.

This is indeed a diverse and inclusive group who competed for their grants through an equitable process. Those are all good things for the NIH mission.

It would benefit these early career scientists and trust in NIH and in your leadership if you would commit to NIH staff and to the public that these grants will not be re-terminated and will be allowed to run their full course through both phases of the K99-R00 program.

Similar analyses apply to many other NIH programs where many grants have been terminated. I would hope that you would examine these issues carefully and thoughtfully and make similar statements in the many cases where they are appropriate.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

P.S. I attach a list of the initial K99 awards for the MOSAIC program that I have been able to find in NIH Reporter. While I have tried to make this comprehensive, it is possible that I have missed a few of these MOSAIC scholars (such as those in the intramural program).

P.P.S. Since I am not sure if you are reading or even receiving my emails, I will be sending a copy of this by certified mail.

I never received a response.

Tylenol and Autism

On September 22, 2025, President Trump gave a press conference flanked by Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., NIH Director Bhattacharya, Head of Medicare and Medicaid Service Mehmet Oz, and Food and Drug Administration Marty Makary (<https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/president-trump-remarks-on-autism-research/666073>) to discuss a potential connection between Tylenol and autism. The press conference would have been complicated, no matter what, as the supposed connection between taking acetaminophen (Tylenol) during pregnancy and autism had been extensively investigated over the years and no strong evidence for this connection had been found. But it was even more chaotic as the President went “off script” and made strong statements that women should only take Tylenol under extreme circumstances. This is problematic because other analgesics such as aspirin, naproxen, and ibuprofen present well-established risks during pregnancy due to their effects on decreasing blood clotting. At the end of the press conference, the bottom line recommendation to women was unclear other than that taking Tylenol presented a substantial risk and women should probably just suck it up and suffer if they experienced substantial pain or other problems during pregnancy.

On September 25th, Director Bhattacharya went on Glenn Beck to try to clean up the mess (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwciXVeWkh4>). He tried to clarify some issues, but also minimized the problems caused by the President’s extremely undisciplined and ignorant delivery of a public health message with real consequences. I felt obligated to write to him and call him out for some of his worst factually incorrect statements.

September 28, 2025

Autism Press Conference and Trust in Science

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I listened to more of your conversation with Glenn Beck. You made a number of statements that are false and misleading. You have considerable responsibilities in your current position and need to live up to them.

You dismiss critics of President Trump's comments at the press conference by saying:

"I think the key point here is something called "Trump Derangement Syndrome".

You went on to say "What President Trump said is a more charismatic version of what I just said" [that acetaminophen should be taken judiciously and with a doctor's advice]

I do not believe I have anything that can be described as "Trump Derangement Syndrome". But I do have a clear case of "False Statement Derangement Syndrome", especially when it comes to individuals who are in positions of authority and responsibility.

He did start out with something close to your position. But he went on to make many misinformed and false statements. Here is a small sample of what President Trump actually said:

"Tell me about that one. And there are other parts of the world where they don't have Tylenol, where they don't have autism. That tells you a lot. And I want to say it right now, and the way I look at it, don't take it. Don't take it. There's no downside in not taking it."

"Don't take Tylenol. Don't give Tylenol to the baby after the baby's born. Every time the baby gets a shot, the baby goes, gets a shot, they say, "Here, take a couple of Tylenol." I've heard that for years. Take Tylenol. Don't take Tylenol, don't have your baby take Tylenol. Now, Tylenol is fine for people that aren't pregnant, that aren't in the situation that we're talking about one very specific situation."

Each of these comments is problematic. In the first he says "There's no downside in not taking it." This is clearly false, as high fever can be dangerous and encouraging women to suffer unnecessarily is irresponsible. He also makes a statement about the alleged lack of autism in other parts of the world and links this to Tylenol. This is just misinformed nonsense. He also made the same point about the Amish which Secretary Kennedy vaguely supported and this is also false.

In the second, he raises not giving children Tylenol. This raises a completely separate issue and also could lead to parents subjecting their children to unnecessary risks and suffering. He concludes with a statement that "Tylenol is fine for people that aren't pregnant" which, I believe, we both agree is incorrect. Tylenol is a useful drug but it does have a dangerous liver toxicity profile and should be used carefully. There are alternatives for children that are safe without this risk.

Your own comments were also problematic. You said

"The sharp rise in the prevalence of autism deserves an urgent response by the scientific community. As Bobby said, the NIH has invested a lot of money to study autism over the years, but the research has not produced the answers that families and parents of autistic children deserve and autistic children themselves deserve. For too long it's been taboo to ask some questions for fear the scientific work might reveal a politically-incorrect answer."

Autism is, indeed, a condition that deserves study and attention. Understanding this condition and developing and validating the best methods for supporting individuals and their families is essential. Elucidating the causes of autism is also important and I applaud the new ADSI program and hope that it produces useful results.

However, I truly do not understand why you insist on painting a political film over science with statements such as "For too long it's been taboo to ask some questions for fear the scientific work might reveal a politically-incorrect answer." Do you really believe that autism researchers are avoiding questions because they fear the answers they will find are politically incorrect? I have not found this to be the case.

Perhaps you should spend more time with clinicians and autism researchers who devote their time taking care of people with autism and trying to understand the underlying causes and the most effective ways of supporting these individuals. These people are deeply committed health

professionals who, unlike the two of us who spend much of our time looking at computer screens, use their time interacting with people directly dealing with autism in their real lives, and not just as props at a press conference.

You have a responsibility to the American people to use your position and expertise to provide good advice to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and to the President of the United States. Please use your scientific training and knowledge to do this, including correcting them in private, and maybe even in public. The public trust in science depends on it.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Appointment of an NIH Institute Director without a Search who happens to be good friends with Vice President JD Vance

In mid-October, I heard rumors that a college friend of Vice President JD was about to be appointed to be director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS). This was shocking since it was not clear what his qualifications were and the position was not even open (unlike more than a dozen other institute director positions). I was skeptical but on October 17th the appointment of Duke Associate Professor Kyle Walsh was announced (see <https://dukechronicle.com/article/duke-university-professor-kyle-walsh-director-of-national-institute-of-environmental-health-selection-process-20251024>). NIEHS is unusual in that it is located in North Carolina rather than in Bethesda, MD with the other 26 institutes and centers.

This violation of process and the appointment of someone whose credentials and skills were unclear at best were extremely concerning to me, especially in light of all of the other open positions. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to share my thoughts on why I thought that this was a colossal mistake.

October 18, 2025

NIEHS Director appointment

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I saw your announcement about the appointment of Dr. Kyle Walsh as Director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. It is hard for me to express how disappointed and saddened that I am with this turn of events. This has little to do with Dr. Walsh or his qualifications. Instead, my concerns are based on the damage that this appointment, with the complete lack of any reasonable process, does to the NIH and the ability of this agency, which matters so much to the American people, to recruit and retain the best people for the 13 institute and center director positions that are now vacant.

Serving as an NIH institute director was one of the great privileges of my life. I also served on search committees for institute and center directors who were recruited to NIH while I was there. These searches were quite rigorous and competitive. The search committee comprised NIH leaders and outstanding people from the scientific community outside NIH. The committees worked hard to identify strong potential candidates and to reach out to these individuals to encourage them to consider applying for these positions. This approach was necessary because many people who might make strong NIH leaders would not have considered applying for these positions which are not part of most people's career ambitions.

In this case, there was no such search for the NIEHS director position. Indeed, the position was not even open (although 13 other IC director positions are with two active searches underway as far as I know). The incumbent in this position had just been reappointed. Instead, Dr. Walsh was identified because he was a buddy of the Vice President since their time together at Yale. His background and interests do not match the mission of NIEHS particularly well. As I understand it, there were even discussions to name him director of another institute, but NIEHS was selected because of its location in North Carolina where Dr. Walsh resides.

Based on this (possibly illegal) lack of search and hiring process, your ability to hire competent leaders to NIH has certainly been compromised. You claim to care about NIH but you allowed this to happen, and I can think of only a few things as damaging to the future of NIH. I believe you may have been under considerable pressure from others in the Administration to allow this appointment, but a leader would have just said "No".

In your first (and only) response to my communications, you referred to "DEI" programs as "ideological boondoggles" and you have made numerous statements about the importance of making decisions based on merit. Next time you feel inclined to make such statements, I would ask you to remind yourself that you got your position based almost entirely on political considerations and you have now implemented hiring practices that are clearly not merit-based. So, just keep your mouth closed and don't use terms that you don't seem to understand or genuinely care about.

With great sadness for the NIH,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Comparisons between Director Bhattacharya and former NIAID Director Tony Fauci

In October 2025, some posted on X/Twitter appeared criticizing NIH Director Bhattacharya for some of his statements and calling him (as a criticism) as "The New Fauci". I took advantage of this opportunity to write to Director Bhattacharya and share my views about Dr. Fauci, a physician, scientist, and leader whom I had had chances to observe close up and in whom I had the utmost respect.

I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to call out this comparison as unfair, not to him, but because he did not have anywhere near the accomplishments and stature of Dr. Fauci.

October 21, 2025

“The New Fauci”

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I saw on social media that some on the political right (with whom you have been working so hard to stay engaged) are criticizing you and referring to you as “The New Fauci”. I think that is completely unfair.

I have known Tony Fauci for more than 2 decades since the time I started at NIH in 2003. Of course, I knew him prior to that by reputation as he has been a leading force in the fight against AIDS, as a physician treating seriously ill AIDS patients at the Clinical Center, as a researcher who was working to try to understand this emerging devastating disease and how best to treat it, and then as one of the government’s and scientific community’s point people interacting with the AIDS activist community, going from villain to ally through principled engagement, listening to concerns, explaining realities from his perspective, and working toward solutions.

I don’t know how familiar you were with Dr. Fauci prior to the COVID pandemic. These were challenging times for him, our nation, and the world. My strong impression is that he did the best he could, trying to navigate the uncertainties around the newly emerging virus, and the challenges of advising Presidents and others about policies that would mitigate some of the considerable risks. It is important to note that this was done not in his capacity as NIAID Director, but rather as a special advisor to the White House under two administrations. In my view, he was very well, almost uniquely, suited to these roles because of his decades of experience advising Presidents and other senior government officials about a wide range of national and international health crises.

I did get a chance to interact with Dr. Fauci quite directly in my time at NIH, and a bit subsequently. He had a prodigious work ethic, was an effective leader of his staff and his institute, and was very direct in calling out issues that he felt needed attention. Programs that I was running were sometimes targets in the last category and I always found him to be forceful but fair, willing to look at relevant data. He was certainly not perfect. He could be prickly and impatient, very (perhaps too) demanding of his staff, and he had a substantial ego. The walls of his office were covered with photos of him with world leaders and other dignitaries which I found a bit off-putting (although I could certainly understand his pride in playing a role in so many important events). He was also, in my experience, completely apolitical. Like most people at NIH, I did not have any direct indication of where they stood on political issues not related to NIH. For Dr. Fauci this was even more striking because he seemed just as comfortable advising Dick Cheney and Barack Obama.

I would hope you would learn from Dr. Fauci’s deep commitment to health research, from the most basic to the most clinical, his completely apolitical approach to NIH and health policy, and his deep knowledge of NIH with its various programs and great potential for good to that you might earn the moniker of “The New Fauci”.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Director Bhattacharya's review of Dr. Fauci's memoir "On Call"

Dr. Fauci had recently published a memoir entitled "On Call: A Doctor's Journey into Public Service". My wife and I had listened to the audio version of the book (read by Dr. Fauci) during a recent family vacation, driving between Pennsylvania and Michigan and Illinois to visit friends and family. We found it to be a fascinating story which rang true to my experiences of interacting with Dr. Fauci during my time at NIH. Ironically, the last thing that happened on the trip was me contracting COVID which I had avoided until then through vaccination, masking, and minimal social interactions.

I discovered that Director Bhattacharya had written a review of "On Call" (<https://reason.com/2024/10/06/the-man-who-thought-he-was-science/>) and read it with interest. The title of the review "Anthony Fauci: The Man who Thought He was Science" reveals the tone that Director Bhattacharya chose to take. I wrote to him with my review of his review. October 22, 2025

Review of "On Call"

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

After sending my previous email, I discovered your review of Dr. Fauci's memoir ("On Call: A Doctor's Journey into Public Service") published in Reason (<https://reason.com/2024/10/06/the-man-who-thought-he-was-science/?nab=1>). I am glad to know that you are aware of Dr. Fauci's accomplishments and even acknowledge grudging respect for some of these. But your review, while accusing Dr. Fauci of various missteps is full of the same smugness of which you accuse Dr. Fauci.

Here are just a few examples:

You state:

Fauci claims credit in his memoir, pointing out that the NIAID developed a clinical trial network that made it easier for researchers at pharmaceutical companies to conduct randomized studies of the effectiveness of HIV medications. But any competent National Institutes of Health (NIH) director would have directed NIAID resources this way.

It is easy to dismiss accomplishments as "what any competent" person would have done, but this does not take into account the challenges associated with executing on this vision. These were fraught and challenging times and I don't think your glib statement is meaningful.

You follow this with a drive-by criticism of the lack of an AIDS vaccine:

Despite billions of dollars spent on the task, no one to date has produced an effective HIV vaccine or a definitive cure, and the virus remains a threat to the health and well-being of the world population. By Fauci's own high standard, there is still a long way to go.

The development of an AIDS vaccine has proven to be one of the great challenges in modern medicine. This is both empirically true and understandable from biological information. HIV is a retrovirus that mutates rapidly so finding general vaccines against retroviruses always going to be hard. Further, HIV attacks specific T-cells so that it targets the very cells that might lead to immune protection. In 1984, the Secretary of Health and Human Services indicated that the public should expect a vaccine within 4 years. This statement was perceived to be without any scientific basis and widely optimistic at the time. Rather than criticizing Dr. Fauci for the lack of an effective vaccine, it might have been fairer and more accurate to point out the potential benefits of an AIDS vaccine and to comment on Dr. Fauci's persistence in pursuing this goal.

You also write:

By contrast, his treatment of scientific critics is harsh, crossing lines that federal science bureaucrats should not cross. In 1991, when University of California, Berkeley, professor and wunderkind cancer biologist Peter Duesberg put forward a (false) hypothesis that the virus, HIV, is not the cause of AIDS, Fauci did everything in his power to destroy him. In his memoir, Fauci writes about debating Duesberg, writing papers, and giving talks to counter his ideas. But Fauci did more, isolating Duesberg, destroying his reputation in the press, and making him a pariah in the scientific community. Though Fauci was right and Duesberg wrong about the scientific question, the scientific community learned it was dangerous to cross Fauci.

You make it sound like Duesberg's statements about HIV and AIDS represented a simple scientific disagreement with no substantial consequences. Duesberg's theories (that recreational drugs or other non-viral entities) were actually common before HIV was isolated in Paris and demonstrated with strong evidence to be the cause of AIDS in 1984. Seven years later, Duesberg was pushing not a competing scientific theory but scientific nonsense, completely inconsistent with vast amounts of data. Most importantly, Duesberg was using his reputation as a distinguished scientist to push his ideas and encouraging people to take actions that would put themselves and others at greater risk for contracting a deadly disease. Dr. Fauci would have been irresponsible if he had not tried to push back against the popularization of these ideas. Fauci's actions were not motivated by any personal animus toward Duesberg nor toward accumulation of power or authority for himself; he was trying to save lives. Moreover, you are given Dr. Fauci too much credit. Duesberg made himself a pariah in the scientific community. He continued with his dangerous nonsense, publishing a book entitled "Inventing the AIDS Virus" in 1996. Later you write:

In 2005, avian flu emerged and spread among birds, chickens, and livestock. Also spreading were worries that the virus could evolve to become more transmissible among human beings. Fauci deployed NIAID money to develop an avian flu vaccine, leading the government to stockpile tens of millions of ultimately unused and unnecessary doses.

This occurred while I was at NIH. There were legitimate concerns about avian flu (as there are now) and there were many efforts to prepare for this possible pandemic. At NIGMS, we

started a program called MIDAS (Modeling Infectious Disease Agent Study) to help develop computer models for testing the utility of drugs or vaccines with various degrees of efficacy as well as non-pharmacological public health interventions in slowing disease spread. You criticize Dr. Fauci for pushing to develop a large stockpile of vaccine doses for a pandemic which (fortunately) did not materialize. Would you have preferred that he just waited until human-to-human spread was occurring to start to generate a vaccine that almost certainly would have been a crucial public health tool? It is hard for me to imagine that you wouldn't be criticizing him for failing to do his job if the pandemic had materialized and he has not taken these steps.

I will not say anything here about the COVID pandemic because your disagreements with Dr. Fauci in this arena are very well known.

I greatly enjoyed Dr. Fauci's book because he tried to bring his readers into events that were important in the recent history of medical research and public health as they happened. Of course, it was a personal perspective with Dr. Fauci's biases and perceptions evident, but I think he tried to capture what he experienced with all of the uncertainties and challenges on on-going events. In contrast, your review is written through a first person retrospectroscope.

I have already cited several examples:

1. AIDS clinical trial network (Any competent leader would have done this)
2. AIDS vaccine (Fauci spend lots of funds failing to achieve his pet project)
3. Avian Flu (Fauci caused the government to waste money preparing for a pandemic that never materialized)

You note that he panicked the public with a statement that "AIDS might be spread by casual household contact" when there was no evidence that it could be transmitted through such actions. You cite "Fauci Was Duplicitous on the AIDS Epidemic Too" published in "The Daily Economy". This, in turn, cites a piece written by Dr. Fauci in JAMA. Here is the quote from the JAMA article for context:

The finding of AIDS in infants and children who are household contacts of patients with AIDS or persons with risks for AIDS has enormous implications with regard to ultimate transmissibility of this syndrome. First, it is possible that AIDS can be vertically transmitted. Perhaps even more important is the possibility that routine close contact, as within a family household, can spread the disease. If, indeed, the latter is true, then AIDS takes on an entirely new dimension. Given the fact that the incubation period for adults is believed to be longer than one year, the full impact of the syndrome among sexual contacts and recipients of potentially infective transfusions is uncertain at present. If we add to this the possibility that nonsexual, non-blood-borne transmission is possible, the scope of the syndrome may be enormous. Again, I must reiterate the fact that we must be cautious in our

acceptance of these infant cases as being truly AIDS. However, the epidemiologic setting in which they occurred, the temporal appearance of the cases at this time, and the lack of their falling neatly into any well-recognized congenital immune deficiency should at least alert us to the possibility that we are truly dealing with AIDS in children.... Only when the putative agent is identified can we fully embark on appropriate steps to limit its scope. Unfortunately, all attempts have failed, and the etiology of this devastating illness still eludes us.

Rather than a flippant comment “to the press” this reads to me like an appropriately responsible and nuanced comment in a medical journal under conditions of considerable uncertainty.

You are now in a leadership position (albeit only for a short time). What have you accomplished?

1. Participation in the termination of NIH grants for ideological reasons through processes that have been deemed to be illegal or likely illegal even by a conservative Supreme Court.
2. Participation in a public spectacle claiming “bold” steps regarding autism by taking a position about acetaminophen as a cause of increasing rates of autism without any critical analysis of the considerable scientific evidence on this topic.
3. Appointing your first new institute director without any process and whose major qualification seems to be that he is a buddy of the Vice President and does not want to move from North Carolina.

I hope you will turn your gaze to your own behavior and decide if you really care about biomedical research and public health. It is not evident from your performance to date. If I were ghostwriting your memoir at this point, my working title would be:

In Service: How a thin-skinned, Stanford-trained MD/PhD discredited himself trying to win favor with the right-wing political apparatus.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg

NIGMS Director 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

The Placement of Dr. Jenna Norton, one of the lead authors of the Bethesda Declaration, on administrative leave

When the Bethesda Declaration, no actions were taken against the NIH staff members who signed the document with their names. This was likely due, at least in part, to the fact that Director Bhattacharya had been very outspoken about his grievances about being criticized and shunned for his dissenting view and the need to develop a culture that tolerated and even encouraged dissent. On the other hand, when staff members at other agencies, notably FEMA and EPA, had subsequently released declarations of dissent, some of them had been placed on administrative leave.

On November 13th, the first day back after the long government shutdown that started fiscal year 2026, Jenna Norton, on the primary authors of the Bethesda Declaration and an outspoken (in her personal capacity) critic of some of the administration's action received notice that she had been placed on administrative leave "for no disciplinary reason". I was deeply concerned about this action and wrote to Director Bhattacharya.

November 13, 2025

Administrative Leave

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I saw on social media that Dr. Jenna Norton, one of the leaders of the effort to write the Bethesda Declaration, has been placed on administrative leave with the statement that this is not being done for any disciplinary reason. This action is deeply concerning. If you were involved in this action, you are an unbelievable hypocrite, speaking about how you want to encourage a culture where dissent is tolerated, yet doing or condoning this. Of course, this was already somewhat clear when you did not have the courtesy or the courage to invite Dr. Norton to your meeting with the signers of the Bethesda Declaration, despite the fact that she was the person who emailed the document to you. If you were not involved in this latest action and it was done driven by others in the Department of Health and Human Services or higher up in the administration, then you need to take charge of the agency that has been placed under your trust for the benefit of the American people. This reveals you to be a feckless and weak leader. Please correct this situation as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011
I received no response.

Note that Dr. Norton remained on administrative leave until late April 2026 when she was reinstated with a four-sentence email (see <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/01/us/politics/trump-jenna-norton-nih.html>). She is now back at work as a program director. She also filed a lawsuit against NIH and HHS which is still pending.

Comments of Pandemic Preparedness

On November 13th Director Bhattacharya and Deputy Director Matthew Memoli published a piece that was adapted in the New York Post on November 14th entitled "Time to trash our pandemic playbook — making people healthy again may be the best medicine" (<https://nypost.com/2025/11/14/opinion/time-to-trash-our-pandemic-playbook-making-people-healthy-again-may-be-the-best-medicine/>). In my view, this was a remarkably inane piece, criticizing attempts to prepare for possible pandemics in a remarkably cartoonish manner and then proposing that the best defense against pandemics was better metabolic health across our society. While there is no doubt that being healthy is protective against some illness,

this victim blaming seemed quite wrongheaded coming from leaders of the NIH. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to share my perspectives.

November 17, 2025

Pandemic Playbook

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I have an important question for you:

Do you hope to be taken seriously by the scientific community as someone who is making good faith efforts to understand issues with a scientific component who critically examines any data used as evidence in scientific arguments?

I ask because it is not at all obvious from many of your public comments including your recent opinion piece published with the NIH Deputy Director “Time to trash our pandemic playbook — making people healthy again may be the best medicine”.

This piece criticizes “a pandemic preparedness playbook” which you describe as

First, catalog every existing pathogen by sending scientists to every remote place and bring biological samples of wildlife to labs.

Second, evaluate the risk of each pathogen infecting humans by testing its ability to penetrate human cells — and sometimes even genetically modifying it to make this more likely.

Third, develop vaccines and therapeutics for the few pathogens that pose the greatest risk before they leap to humans. Crucially, this step involves awarding large contracts to pharmaceutical manufacturers to develop and stockpile the countermeasures.

As you are now employed by the taxpayers as a member of the federal government, I might have thought that you would have “pandemic playbook” more precisely as there was a document entitled “Playbook for Early Response to High Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents” (<https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/6819268/Pandemic-Playbook.pdf>), outlining coordination between federal agencies, stocking piling of personal protective equipment, and so on that the Trump administration notably ignored during the COVID outbreak. Instead, you create a cartoon “playbook” based on some research activities related to the identification of biological agents that might become serious threats to human health.

I will not go into the many flaws and fallacies in your piece other than to note that you, as you often have, glowingly cite evidence from Sweden about alternative approaches to the pandemic and their outcomes. You do not critically example the data you chose to use from Sweden which are, in my view and those of many others, inappropriately manipulated to minimize excess deaths.

You were deeply offended when then NIH Director Francis Collins sent emails regarding the Great Barrington Declaration and you described efforts to criticize the Great Barrington Declaration as a “government propaganda campaign”. The piece you posted, written with your Deputy Director with your official titles, presumably written in your official capacities, clearly qualifies as “government propaganda”; It is certainly not a good faith, well-reasoned policy document.

You are now the Director of the National Institutes of Health, an important agency on which the American public depends on in the present and for its future. You are no longer just a health economist who should feel free to shitpost about topics that align with his political agency. Once again, you are embarrassing yourself and the agency you are charged to lead.

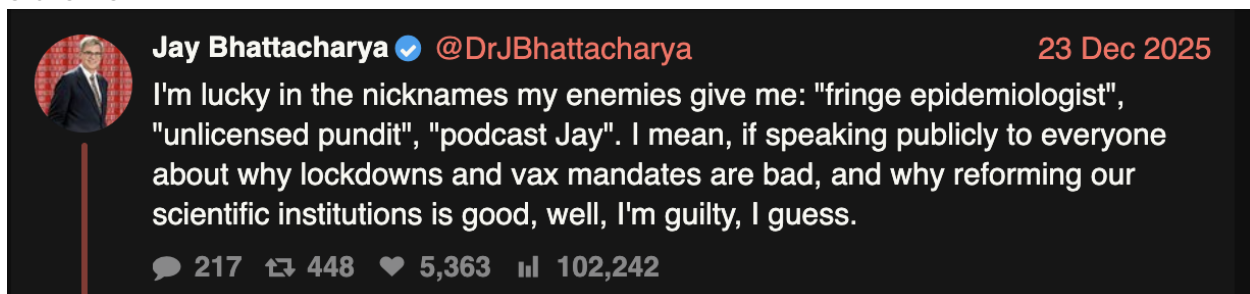
Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

P.S. Several people shared the email that you sent to NIH staff today. That was a nice gesture. I couldn't help but note the statement “Together, we ensured that our grants, contracts, and critical research efforts continued to move forward – a remarkable achievement under any circumstances”. Are you not aware that you are a significant part of the “circumstances”? You need to demonstrate some ability to hold yourself accountable for living up to your responsibilities.
I did not receive a response.

Framing those with differing perspectives as “enemies”

On December 23rd, Director Bhattacharya posted on his personal Twitter/X account this statement:



I was struck by his use of the term “enemies”. It seems that referring to critics or those who have different scientific perspectives or policy preferences as “enemies” is quite revealing. I felt that I should email him and share that I thought that this was an inappropriate framing and that, as a senior government figure, he should be prepared to accept and learn from criticisms rather than feeling slighted.

December 26, 2026

Your "enemies" and nicknames

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

Someone shared a recent post from you on X with me where you referred to your "enemies" and how they referred to you by nicknames such as "fringe epidemiologist", "unlicensed pundit", and "Podcast Jay". You bravely accepted these nicknames saying that you have been "speaking publicly to everyone about why lockdowns and vax mandates are bad, and why reforming scientific institutions is good."

I believe you are confused about a couple of important issues. First, I believe that when you use the term "enemies", you are referring to people whose scientific perspectives and policy preferences differ from yours. You and your colleagues argued that lockdowns and vaccine mandates would be more harmful than focused protection directed toward individuals who were most at risk from dying from COVID. These arguments were bolstered by claims that the number of individuals who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 was substantially higher than was believed at the time and that most infections were benign.

Others had different perspectives, based on studies other than the study that you had helped design and conduct which many felt (and feel) was substantially flawed and on their experiences as practicing physicians (unlike yourself) who had treated COVID patients of many different ages. Based on these sorts of data and experiences, they came to different conclusions about what was happening and made different policy recommendations based on their judgements about the potential harms of various strategies. The use of the term "enemies" is quite unhelpful as it is not conducive to the thoughtful discussions you claim to crave.

Second, and much more important, you do not seem to understand you are currently the Director of the National Institutes of Health. Many of your comments focus on the COVID pandemic. This was certainly an important event in American and international public health but represents a small percentage of what the National Institutes of Health is responsible for and is becoming largely a historical event.

As we approach the time of the National Football League playoffs, much of your behavior seems reminiscent of that of a Monday morning commentator, second guessing decisions made during the actual games and arguing that if the coaches and players had listened to your deep insights, the games would have different outcomes.

You are the head coach now. You have considerable authority to provide a vision and then to work with other coaches and the players to execute on that vision. Other than terminating and reshaping grants to remove any emphasis of increasing inclusion of individuals from groups historically underrepresented in biomedical research (often in violation of the law as ruled by federal judges and the Supreme Court), I can see very little evidence of your vision and, especially, any execution.

You have repeatedly made statements about how concerned you are about developing the careers of scientists early in their careers. Yet many of the scientists directly affected by the unprecedented grant terminations are these early career scientists. The grant success rate for early career scientists, recently presented at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Advisory Council meeting, was substantially lower than in previous years. You have spoken (at least on podcasts) about the importance of giving young scientists a chance to receive substantial funding to work on their most innovative ideas, yet the NIH program developed just for that purpose made fewer awards than in more than a decade.

You posted “a unified strategy” (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-director/statements/advancing-nih-mission-through-unified-strategy#our-priorities>) describing your policies and priorities in a limited number of areas, most aligned with the grant terminations noted above but not mentioning key strategic issues such as the balance between fundamental, translational, and clinical research; the balance of disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment; any special role of the NIH intramural program; and so on. To torture the football analogy a bit more, this seems to be equivalent to opening up a binder with the game plan for the next games and seeing only sections on special teams.

Let me return to the nicknames you cite: “fringe epidemiologist”, “unlicensed pundit”, and “Podcast Jay”. These do seem apt in some ways although they are unfair in others. I don’t think it is appropriate to call you a “fringe epidemiologist” as you, like me, is not an epidemiologist at all as far as I can tell. Your training is in health economics with no particular expertise in infectious diseases or other relevant fields.

The term “unlicensed pundit” was, at first, confusing to me. Pundits are not licensed; there appear to be no restrictions about who can present themselves as a pundit. However, this term appears to have its origin in the fact that you have never been eligible to be a licensed physician as you completed no medical training after medical school. The term was used in the context of you opining about COVID-related issues despite the fact that you have treated zero COVID patients.

Finally, I come to the term “Podcast Jay”. You are correct that the responsibilities of the NIH Director include communicating with the public about the NIH, its mission, its accomplishments, and its programs. You have taken on this responsibility with great gusto appearing on more than 50 podcasts and other fora. This is vastly more than most other NIH Directors, particularly in their first year. My concerns relate to the fact that you seem not to be particularly focused about becoming well informed about NIH programs prior to all of their appearances. From what of I have heard, you tend to focus instead about COVID and your perceived grievances and not about all of the progress that NIH has made and the challenges ahead.

You have been given a solemn responsibility, leading the most important biomedical research organization in the world. I would very much like to give you a new nickname that

captured your accomplishments as a leader who transformed NIH for the better. But, unfortunately, that is not a path that you are on and not even one that you seem interested in enough to do much of the necessary work.

One of the greatest coaches of my lifetime was UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. Among the many important sentiments that he conveyed was “Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.” Perhaps this would be a good thing for you to focus on in 2026.

With best wishes for the new year.

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

NIH staff resignations and their opinion piece in STAT

On January 10th, 2026, four NIH staff members who had resigned from NIH over the changes that had taken place published an opinion piece in STAT (<https://www.statnews.com/2026/01/10/nih-resign-protest-four-leaders-cite-interference-censorship/>). In this substantial piece, the four former NIH staffers called out the changes in the culture at NIH, the termination (subsequently determined to be illegal by the Supreme Court) of grants, the lack of clarity or support for health disparities and health equity research, and other issues. But Director Bhattacharya minimized their concerns by ascribing it all to NIH ending their support for “DEI” which he, as usual, does not define and treats as political rather than substantial. I wrote to him regarding his reaction.

January 12, 2026

Reaction to STAT letter

Dear Director Bhattacharya: Someone shared your post on “X” regarding the letter published in STAT entitled “The NIH has lost its scientific integrity. So we left.” You say: **If you read this story carefully, you’ll see that the authors left @NIH because we have ended our support for DEI. They falsely believe that depoliticizing science is political interference in science!**

I must say that the word “carefully” is doing a lot of heavy lifting here. Of course, it is difficult to respond to your comments because you still have never defined what you mean by “DEI”. For this purpose, I assume you mean increasing representation of individuals from groups that have been historically underrepresented in the biomedical workforce. Their concerns do include some of your actions that have harmed scientists with interests in these underrepresented groups, particularly those early in their careers, with your

actions. But they also discuss health disparities research, an important field that you claim to be supportive of, but have chosen to take destructive actions against. They go on to list concerns about vaccines, the health of sexual and gender minorities, climate change, and misinformation. In addition, they note the culture of fear that now permeates many facets of NIH.

Your “careful” reading of their heartfelt letter and concluding that the only issue is “DEI” seems to me to be like watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” (the unedited version) and concluding that the story is all about the challenges of running a Building and Loan in a small town.

I really do wish that you would utilize your Stanford education to think about events in your life and your part in them with more seriousness and less political calculation. But maybe this is just who you are.

Sincerely,
Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

“All I Do is Win” video on X

A friend shared a video of Director Bhattacharya set to “All I Do is Win”. This struck me as ironic since he had repeatedly spoken for the need of humility in public service, criticizing those, including Dr. Fauci, who he deemed to be arrogant. The tone was also similar to President Trump’s “you will get tired of all of the winning” comments.

I was sufficiently offended by this display by the Director of the NIH, especially in the face of the lack of substantial actual accomplishments, that I wrote him a thoroughly snarky email.

January 21, 2026

Video on “X”

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

Someone shared the video you posted on X

(https://x.com/NIHDirector_Jay/status/2013752138493559265) which is set to “All I Do is Win”. Given that humility is a frequent topic of which you have spoken on podcasts, I can only imagine how hard this must have been for you to participate in.

I have been asked to nominate for the Nobel prizes in Chemistry and in Physiology or Medicine in some years in the past, although I am never sure whether this will occur in any given year. Nonetheless, I do want to be prepared. Please forward me your current Curriculum Vitae so that I can be ready. I know that Nobel Prize nominations and awards are highly valued in your administration.

Humbly yours,
Jeremy M. Berg, Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I do not receive his C.V. or any other response.

On January 30th, the MAHA institute held a “Reclaiming Science” event (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD0ALSTVdAc>) with NIH Director Bhattacharya. There were many troubling aspects of this event (e.g. reclaiming science from whom, exactly, scientists?), but I learned at *Nature* reporter Max Kozlov and *Science* reporter Jocelyn Kaiser were being blocked from entering the event, even though they had pre-registered (see <https://bsky.app/profile/maxkozlov.bsky.social/post/3mdnvfx7tcs2f>). This seemed to me to be a serious threat to press freedom. Note: It appears that Jocelyn Kaiser was eventually allowed in as I learned subsequently. I did write to Director Bhattacharya urging him to speak out about these actions.

January 30, 2026

Suppression of the scientific press

Dear Director Bhattacharya: I learned that Max Kozlov from *Nature* and Jocelyn Kaiser from *Science* (and perhaps others) were denied admission to today's "Reclaiming Science" MAHA Institute event.

I call on you to issue a public statement condemning this outrageous act of suppression of fully credentialed members of the press. I would hope that you would feel compelled to do this as someone who claims to believe in freedom of expression and as a senior official of the United States government who swore an oath to our Constitution.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
United States citizen

I did not make any statement and I received no response.

Framing scientific disagreements as political tyranny

I watched the Reclaiming Science event as it was available online. I was dismayed to hear the introduction where the hostess said: “Millions of Americans only discovered the problems [regarding NIH] during to COVID era when bad science was mobilized in the name of political tyranny.” This strong statement ascribing malignant motivations for what I saw as judgements that were intended (accurately or not) to protect public health and avoid preventable deaths. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya, expressing my concerns for this inaccurate and harmful framing.

January 31, 2026

NIH and "political tyranny"

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I watched some of the "Reclaiming Science" event at the MAHA Institute.

In the introduction, Debra Sheldon said "Welcome to the members of the press". As I wrote yesterday, it is shocking that this welcome did not extend to two highly credentialed science journalists.

She continued "But millions of Americans only discovered the problems [regarding NIH] during to COVID era when bad science was mobilized in the name of political tyranny."

Do you honestly believe that physician-scientists such as Dr. Fauci, other public health officials, and governors and mayors were motivated by the desire for tyranny and control rather than by attempts to protect public health and prevent avoidable deaths?

One could have good faith discussions about scientific evidence (as it was known at the time) and the non-disease-related impacts of lockdowns to understand what happened during the pandemic and how such events might be managed in the future. But inappropriately framing public health policies in terms of tyranny is not the least bit helpful.

It is disturbing that you and others at this event focused on the loss of public distrust of science when you are actively, inappropriately, and aggressively promoting this loss of trust.

Please try to do better for the benefit of NIH and science (but I won't hold my breath).

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Reclaiming Science and a story about Max Perutz: An email to NIH Deputy Director for Extramural Research Jon Lorsch

During his remarks at the "Reclaiming Science" event, Director Bhattacharya told a story about a young researcher in England named Max Perutz who determined the three-dimensional structure of hemoglobin (Bhattacharya mistakenly referred to it as myoglobin which is a different protein whose structure was determined by a colleague of Perutz's. Director Bhattacharya used this as an example of a young scientist with a big idea who ignored the advice of more senior colleagues to solve a hugely important problem. It was a compelling story but had the minor problem that, as Director Bhattacharya told it, it was completely wrong. Rather than writing to Director Bhattacharya, I chose to write to Jon Lorsch who had become NIH Deputy Director for Extramural Research. I know Director Lorsch well as I had recruited to him to the faculty of my department at Johns Hopkins out of his postdoctoral fellowship in the late 1990s. He would understand the Perutz story and why it was wrong.

January 31, 2026

Max Perutz story

Dear Jon: I watched some of the "Reclaiming Science" event at the MAHA Institute yesterday. There were many aspects of the discussion that I found (and I hope you would find) deeply troubling. However, there is one part that I think you could help with.

Director Bhattacharya was speaking about the well-known problem of the relatively advanced age of independent investigators and the problems associated with working on high-risk questions. He illustrated this with an account of Max Perutz and the solution of the structure of what he said was myoglobin but, as you likely know, Perutz always worked on hemoglobin. He said that "All of the professors told him that this was too hard; don't do this...He just ignored them."

This is completely inaccurate. It is true that no one knew how the structures of proteins would be solved when Max started working on this problem, going back to his PhD thesis, more than a decade earlier. But Max was working as part of an organized effort led by Sir Lawrence Bragg that included Francis Crick, John Kendrew, and others. Others elsewhere were working on the protein structure problem as well including, of course, Linus Pauling.

It is embarrassing when the Director of the NIH chooses a story to tell to illustrate an important point, but gets the essence of his chosen story completely wrong.

I have written many emails to Director Bhattacharya but he has not answered them, with one exception. I am not sure if he even sees my emails at this point. I would ask that you try to educate him since his Stanford education is failing him. You might even

suggest he read "The Eighth Day of Creation". It is one of my favorite books, full of fascinating history and important lessons in how scientific progress is actually made.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy

Jon did respond after I pestered him once.

Jeremy,

Sorry for the delay. Your email came during the shutdown and I was unable to respond. I didn't attend the MAHA Institute event and haven't been able to watch any of it. The Eighth Day of Creation is indeed a great book (I think I have two copies). In fact, I once recommended it to my father who liked it so much that he ended up using it in a class he taught for doctoral students in business administration.

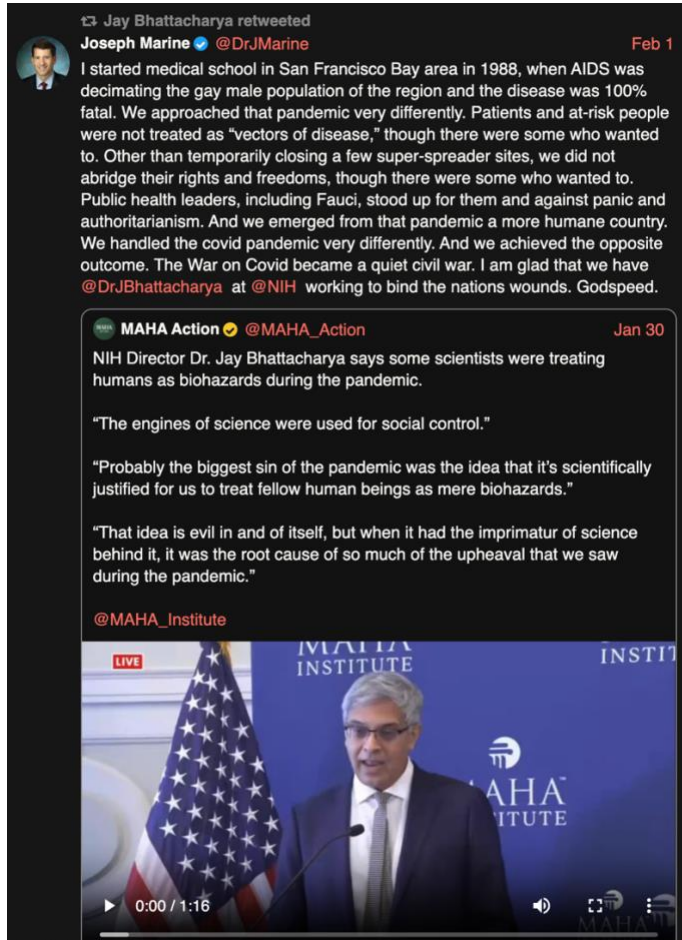
I will pass your comments on to Jay.

All the best,

Jon

Comparing the public health responses to AIDS and COVID-19

A friend shared a retweet from Director Bhattacharya regarding the public health response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.



I was surprised to see comments about how humane and respectful the response to the AIDS epidemic has been from a physician who started medical school in 1988. As someone who had experienced the response to AIDS starting in 1981, this is not how I would have ever thought to characterize it. These were scary times as no one understood this emerging disease with a 100% fatality rate and how it was transmitted. Gay men and those potentially associated with them were feared and shunned. I hope that the poster, Dr. Joseph Marine, now a cardiologist at Johns Hopkins, was just ignorant, as he had started medical school in 1988, after HIV had been identified as the causative agent and the public health response had been improved, particularly in San Francisco where the gay community had a strong political presence. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya, as I wanted to make sure that Dr. Marine's comments were not consistent with my perspectives on these historical events.

February 1, 2026

The public health and public response to AIDS

Dear Director Bhattacharya: Someone shared a retweet from your account on "X" with me. You retweeted Dr. Joseph Marine (now a physician at Johns Hopkins) who commented on how the AIDS epidemic was handled very differently from the COVID pandemic, based on his experience as a medical student in the San Francisco Bay area in 1988.

I hope you are just ignorant about why his statement is deeply inaccurate and are not just spreading misinformation and basking in his expressed adoration of you.

He was responding to a tweet where the statement that humans were treated as biohazards during COVID was attributed to you and he was claiming how different the response to AIDS was. The AIDS epidemic started in the United States in 1981. People with AIDS (then called GRID for Gay-Related ImmunoDeficiency) and those suspected of having AIDS were, indeed, treated as biohazards. They were publicly shunned and touched by first responders only once they had donned gloves and face masks. This was true even after the mode of transmission had been established and the virus responsible for AIDS had been identified by French researchers. Ryan White, a hemophiliac who contracted AIDS from contaminated clotting factor preparations, was basically expelled from his school at the age of 12 or 13, even after doctors assured school leaders that he posed no risk to other students.

The public health response to the emerging immunodeficiency syndrome in 1981 was poor. There was not concerted effort at the federal level and President Reagan did not even mention the existence of this horrible disease until 1985. The mode of transmission was established by a small group of researchers at the CDC in conjunction with public health officials in San Francisco and New York. Dr. Robert Gallo from NCI did get involved, but he misappropriated the virus that the French had isolated, either through accidental laboratory contamination or intentionally. Of course, Dr. Fauci emerged as a leader through the AIDS crisis, taking care of patients, with no other options, at the Clinical Center, working with AIDS activists after initial contentious interactions, and making some key discoveries in his laboratory.

Dr. Marine is correct that seven years after the emergence of the disease, more humane and informed treatment of HIV and AIDS patients was in places in hospitals, particularly in places like San Francisco. However, to claim that this was the reaction in the first years of the epidemic when information was limited, fear was commonplace, and federal government leadership was largely absent, is misinformation of the worst kind.

I sincerely wish you would use the bully pulpit you have been granted to share accurate and informed material about public health and the responses of the federal government and the medical establishment.

You might benefit from reading "And the Band Played On" by Randy Shilts, a reporter from San Francisco, who chronicled many key aspects of the first years of the AIDS epidemic.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Characterizing Dr. Fauci not “an actual scientist”

As I was looking around Twitter/X for these comments about AIDS, I noticed another retweet from Director Bhattacharya where he shared a post from Walter Kirn who commented that things had changed at NIAID because “the new director is an actual scientist”. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to once again point out that one might have disagreements with Dr. Fauci and his policy recommendations but not acknowledging that he was an accomplished scientist was just factually incorrect.

February 10, 2026

Comments regarding Dr. Fauci

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I saw that you retweeted this regarding Dr. Fauci.



One can have a range of opinions regarding Dr. Fauci's ego and about the recommendations that he contributed to during the COVID pandemic.

However, to question whether he "is an actual scientist" is ignorant and misleading and you are lending your "credibility" to people who, unlike you, do not know better.

Dr. Fauci is an incredibly accomplished scientist, physician, and scholar. Perhaps you are discounting his dozens of very important papers (among many hundreds of publications), his work as a physician in the Clinical Center taking care of people who needed expert care under difficult circumstances, and his scholarship as, for example, as an editor of Harrison's (which you have cited as an important source during your (prematurely discontinued) medical training).

This is tremendously frustrating as your claim to be so concerned about the loss of trust regarding the NIH and biomedical research.

Perhaps today would be a good day to make a resolution to be a serious person who has been entrusted with leading the most important biomedical research institution in the world and not a social media influencer on par with Hailey Welch.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Director Bhattacharya imitating Mike Tyson

My Twitter/X experience continued when I discovered that Director Bhattacharya had shared a doctored photo of himself with facial tattoos like those of boxer and convicted sex offender Mike Tyson. Tyson had become used by Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as a spokesperson for eating real food including meat, despite his obvious failings and lack on meaningful expertise. I thought this was deeply unbecoming for the NIH Director and a terrible example, hurtful to the victims of sexual assault and other violent acts. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya to call him out for his complicity in this messaging campaign.

February 21, 2026

Public role models

Dear Director Bhattachaya: I saw your post on "X" with your image doctored with face tattoos to match Mike Tyson.



While this is not as destructive as many of the actions that are taking place under your watch, I would suggest that you and your colleagues rethink the use of a man who is convicted sex offender and who was sanctioned for committing an act too violent for a boxing match (biting a piece of his opponent's ear off) as a role model for anything. He was also convicted in a road rage incident in Montgomery County in 2021 and sentenced to jail time, but this was, no doubt, due to the trauma of lockdowns during the COVID pandemic.

I hope you are finding time to exercise with all of your new responsibilities.

Shaking my head in astonishment, I remain,

Jeremy M. Berg, Director NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Replication and the differences between economics and biological sciences

Director Bhattacharya had spoken extensively about his view that replication of scientific results is a substantial problem, and that part of his solution is providing better cultural and financial support for replication studies. Discussions of a “replication crisis” in science had been going on for more than a decade and there are some real concerns. The issues and the context vary substantially from field to field. I was most familiar with replication issues in basic cancer biology as I had been involved with these issues when I was Editor-in-Chief of Science magazine from 2016-2019. There are many nuances to what can seem to be simple questions. One example is that in biological sciences, there are relatively few formal replication studies, but there are many examples of studies that use previous results, observations, and techniques to extend results. If earlier results are not replicable, this is often detectable by the lack of such extensions. I agree that this could be made more transparent.

Since Director Bhattacharya comes from the field of economics which is very different from biological sciences, I was concerned that he might not appreciate that the lack of formal replication studies should not be simply interpreted to reflect a lack of replicability. I wrote to him and included NIH Deputy Director of Extramural Research Jon Lorsch about this matter.

February 21, 2026

Perspectives on Replication

Dear Director Bhattacharya and Deputy Director Lorsch: I saw a post Director Bhattacharya retweeted about replication in economics. This begins with:

Between 1974 and 2014, only 0.1% of publications in the top 50 economics journals were replication studies. That's 40 years. Thousands of papers. Almost none replicated. We've built careers on findings no one has verified. When economists finally replicate studies, 40-67% fail depending on the study.

While reading this, it struck me how different this sort of science is from the chemical and biochemical research that I have been involved in for over 40 years.

Most biological science is CUMULATIVE. There are few replication studies, but there are lots of studies that build on previous results where key observations are replicated along the way.

As an example, I proposed a three-dimensional structure for so-called zinc finger domains that occur in gene regulatory proteins in 1987. I also pointed out that the proposed structure had implications about how these proteins recognize specific DNA sequences. In 1989, a group at Scripps Research Institute confirmed and extended my structural proposal using NMR methods. Then, in 1991, a group at Johns Hopkins determined the three-dimensional structure of a zinc finger protein bound to a DNA target site. This confirmed the NMR structure and also confirmed my ideas about how these proteins recognize DNA, but provided many more details. This structure helped many groups (including mine) understand both how natural zinc finger proteins recognize DNA and allowed them to design zinc finger proteins that would recognize pre-selected DNA sequences. This laid the foundation for technologies used in agriculture and other fields and in clinical trials for a potential functional cure for HIV infection.

But, throughout this, I cannot think of a single example of what would be described as a "replication study". There is also not a single example of a p-value in any of these papers. Statistical hypothesis testing is just not part of how this science moves forward. This is another example of why John Ioannidis's famous paper "Why Most Published Research Findings are False" is itself almost certainly false.

I believe that there are important issues regarding replication in science and the scientific literature that need to be addressed. But, it is important to frame the issues thoughtfully and carefully if we are to make progress on this important issue. As you probably learned in medical school, arriving at the right diagnosis is almost always an important step in developing an effective treatment.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
NIGMS Director 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Director Bhattacharya's appearance on the "Why Should I Trust You" podcast

Director Bhattacharya has appeared many podcasts. He appeared on "Why Should I Trust You?", a podcast that has a reputation for being relatively balanced in the guests and topics related to public health that they have as guests. Director was relatively combative about a variety of topics. One topic of particular interest to me was health disparities. His response tended to focus on biological explanations for any differences in outcome without acknowledging the role of social and societal factors. I wrote to him to share my perspectives and data about health disparities and how a wide range of factors contribute.

February 27, 2026

Why Should I Trust You and health disparities

Dear Director Bhattacharya: I watched your appearance on the "Why Should I Trust You?" podcast. (<https://substack.com/home/post/p-189265671>) I thought it was a very engaging discussion. Thank you for doing it.

One of the issues that stood out to me was your response to the question:

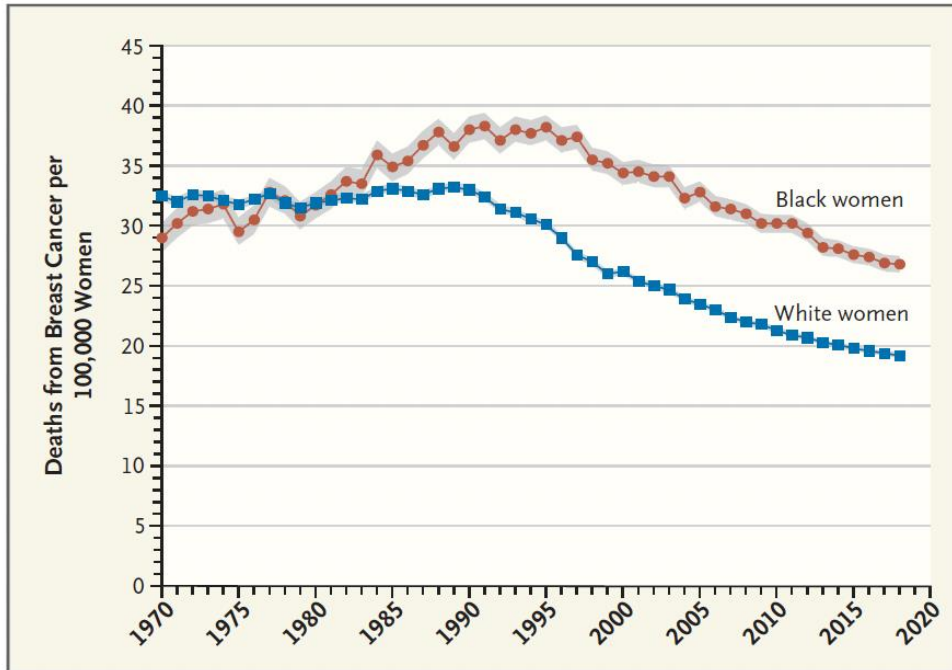
"... Doesn't the data show that chronic disease kind of does discriminate like it's undisputed that black Americans face disproportionately worse health outcomes?"

You responded:

"There are differences, biological differences, and the NIH portfolio accounts for those biological differences, and different people from different populations have different rates of disease. Again, we take that into account. That's not "DEI", that's just fundamental biology."

There are certainly biological differences that account for some racial differences in disease occurrence or outcome. But there are almost always larger social and societal factors that contribute to racial health disparities. How do we know this?

Here is an example of age-adjusted differences in breast cancer mortality over time for Black women versus White women (<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2200244>)



Trends in Breast-Cancer Mortality among Black Women and White Women in the United States, 1970 through 2018.

Age-standardized breast cancer mortality (deaths per 100,000 women per year) was

There was little disparity from 1970-1980 then the disparity grew until about 1995 and has remained relatively constant but substantial (~25% (relative)) since.

This is not basic biology or genetics changing over time in years. The good news is that breast cancer mortality is coming down for both groups of women through better methods and implementation of early detection and more effective treatments. But the racial health disparity remains relatively constant.

You said at the recent HELP committee hearing that addressing serious health issues for everybody will increase life expectancy, implying that all groups would benefit equally. These data reveal some of the flaws of that logic.

My view is that studies and implementation with consideration for what I believe you mean by "DEI" factors (which you seem reluctant to define in any clear way) are essential for real progress. We need to understand social factors (access, trust, diet, poverty, and so on) and how to address them, in addition to any real intrinsic biological differences.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
 Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Public trust in NIH and science

Director Bhattacharya speaks frequently about how public trust in science and federal science agencies and claims that this public trust was greatly eroded by the handling of the COVID pandemic. He claims to be working toward restoring that trust. However, he rarely acknowledges that he and his colleagues played a big role in decreasing trust by their statement and actions during the pandemic and that his leadership of NIH has substantially eroded trust from the scientific community toward NIH. He may be speaking about trust within limited right-leaning groups. When a poll was released showing that trust in career scientists remains high, having only dropped slightly, whereas trust in agency leaders had decreased more markedly, I thought it would be appropriation to share those data with him.

March 7, 2026

Public Trust in Federal Scientists

Dear Director Bhattacharya: I know you speak frequently about how much you are concerned about public trust in NIH and how much you want to be driven by data. In that spirit, I hope you have seen this recent poll from the Annenberg Public Policy Center (<https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/stark-divide-americans-more-confident-in-career-scientists-at-u-s-health-agencies-than-leaders/>).

Their headline conclusion is that 67% of Americans have confidence in career scientists working at US federal health agencies whereas only 43% have confidence in their leaders. Furthermore, 62% of Americans trust NIH to be a source of trustworthy public health information now compared to 75% in February 2024 (after the COVID pandemic but before you became NIH Director).

I hope you will look at these data carefully and think about steps that you, now a leader at two of the agencies, could do to help.

Sincerely,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

A new “Scientific Freedom” lecture series at NIH

In early March, I learned that Director Bhattacharya was initiating what was being called a “Scientific Freedom” lecture series with Matt Ridley as the inaugural speaker. I found this to be positively Orwellian. Matt Ridley is a British science author who is also a landed peer and heir to a coal mining fortune. He is an effective science writer, and I had enjoyed one of his earlier books about the human genome. But he also had recently published a book about the origins of COVID and the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This questions, with cherry-picked data and inuendo, zoonotic explanations for the virus and, instead, favors the view that this was a lab-created virus. This view was being pushed by the Trump administration and Director Bhattacharya has often implied, without providing much evidence, that he felt that this was the best explanation for the pandemic. I wrote to Director Bhattacharya about the branding of this “freedom” lecture and about his choice of a British journalist, rather than a virologist or someone deeply engaged with the data regarding COVID origins, as the speaker.

March 10, 2026

Scientific "Freedom" Lecture

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

Someone shared the announcement about the inaugural lecture in the new NIH Scientific Freedom Lecture Series:

Matt Ridley on *The Search for the Origin of COVID-19*.

I have several questions:

(1) **The Branding:** Why a “Freedom” lecture series? Freedom from what, exactly? Has Matt Ridley had difficulty having his voice heard with his views about possible COVID-19 origins? Didn't having a book published by Harpers Perennial in 2022 on that topic argue that he has had access to effective platforms to air his views?

It is striking that you feel obligated to lift your leg and spray your grievance in so many ways. I find this to be quite revealing about your insecurities and not helpful to the NIH or increasing public trust in this important agency.

(2) **The Speaker:** I will not get into the qualifications of Matt Ridley to speak on the subject or the fact that these may include the alignment with his political, rather than scientific, views with yours. I would note that the NIH policy regarding international collaboration notes the requirement for the presence of “unusual talent, resources, populations, or environmental conditions...that are not readily available in the United States.” Were there no speakers in the United States who could speak to possible origins of COVID-19, even if they are required to have views that align with yours? I personally believe that science should be a broadly open international activity, but I am wondering if your approach to choosing a speaker should be “aligned with agency priorities”?

Sincerely,
Jeremy M. Berg
Director NIGMS, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Freedom of speech, President Trump, and FCC Chairman Brendan Carr

As attacks on freedom of speech became more explicit with the President of the United States and the Chair of the Federal Communications Commission making overt threats, I felt that it would be appropriate for Director Bhattacharya to speak out opposing these statements, given his own statements about the importance of free speech. I urged him to speak out, at least privately and, preferably, publicly.

March 15, 2026

Government suppression of free speech

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I know you have spoken out frequently about the importance of free speech and, in particular, the importance of the government not stifling freedom of speech or freedom of the press, in violation of the first amendment of our constitution.

In that context, I assume that you were as appalled as I was with this post from the President of the United States.



This was made worse by a subsequent post by the head of a federal government agency, the Federal Communications Commission, threatening broadcast licenses over what this government rules to be "fake news".



Brendan Carr 
@BrendanCarrFCC



Broadcasters that are running hoaxes and news distortions - also known as the fake news - have a chance now to correct course before their license renewals come up.

The law is clear. Broadcasters must operate in the public interest, and they will lose their licenses if they do not.

And frankly, changing course is in their own business interests since trust in legacy media has now fallen to an all time low of just 9% and are ratings disasters.

The American people have subsidized broadcasters to the tune of billions of dollars by providing free access to the nation's airwaves.

It is very important to bring trust back into media, which has earned itself the label of fake news.

When a political candidate is able to win a landslide election victory after in the face of hoaxes and distortions, there is something very wrong. It means the public has lost faith and confidence in the media. And we can't allow that to happen.

Time for change!

Since I know you are deeply concerned about restoring public trust in government agencies and their actions, I hope that you are speaking out behind the scenes about how counterproductive and unconstitutional these actions are. It would be even better if you could find the spine to make a public statement expressing your concerns about these posts.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response, and he made no public statements on this matter.

The NIH Director and CPAC

Even though the NIH Director is a Presidentially appointed position, NIH Directors rarely venture in the partisan politics. I was disgusted when I learned that Director Bhattacharya was a featured speaker at this years Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) as it is difficult to imagine a more partisan forum. I watched the videocast of Director Bhattacharya's remarks. They were full of misleading and incorrect statements. I wrote to him with my perspectives and shared some data relevant to his points.

March 30, 2026

CPAC Performance

Dear Director Bhattacharya: I watched your performance at CPAC. I feel I must respond to three points:

(1) You made this statement:

"In 2025, the NIH invested almost 50 billion dollars in biomedical research. And I'll tell you: It's no longer Tony Fauci's NIH. That investment has led to discoveries that have transformed medicine and saved millions of lives. The NIH-supported research has turned HIV into a manageable condition..."

This statement is utterly misleading. In order of occurrence:

(i) "It's no longer Tony Fauci's NIH"

Dr. Fauci was never NIH director. The advice that he provided with which you so strongly disagree was made in his capacity as Presidential Advisor, not in his role as NIAID Director. It is frankly disgusting that your deep insecurity causes you to vilify a public servant who devoted his entire career to NIH and trying to improve the lives of others.

(2) "That investment has led to discoveries that have transformed medicine and saved millions of lives"

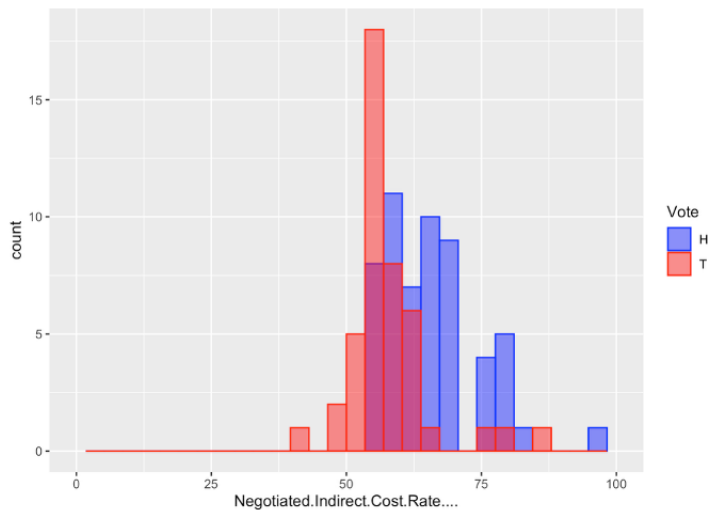
The antecedent of "That" is the almost 50 billion dollars invested in 2025. You are misleading your audience that last year's investment has already produced dramatic results. This is utterly false. This is not a criticism, it is just how research works, as you know. Many members of the audience may not understand this fact and your statement is self-serving and, frankly, a lie.

(3) "The NIH-supported research has turned HIV into a manageable condition..."

It is true that NIH-supported and other research has transformed HIV infection from a death sentence to a manageable condition over 40 years of effort, with some breakthroughs and much incremental progress. Many people have contributed to this progress but few would argue that the person most responsible was none other than Dr. Fauci. Your audience likely does not know this and you seeming to deny him credit for his lifetime of leadership on this is a disgrace.

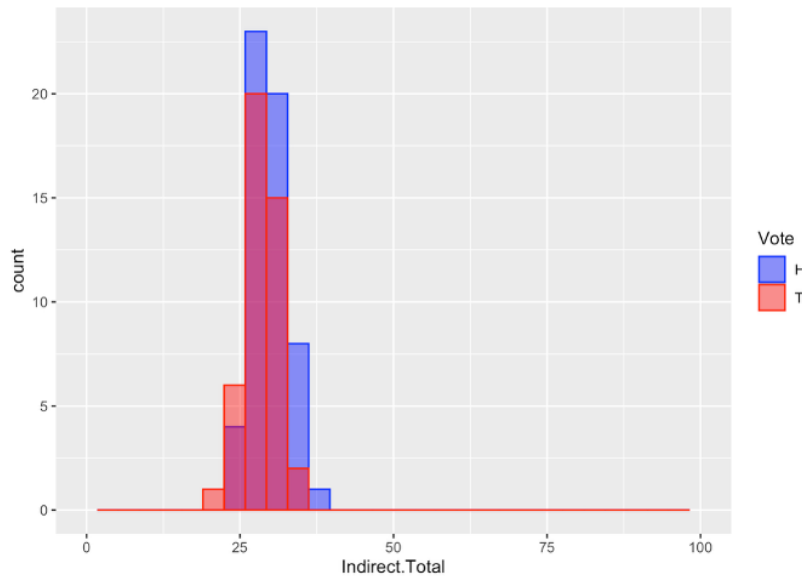
(2) You talked about using "market forces" to support biomedical research. Again, this is quite misleading. NIH already uses competition to develop its research portfolio. I believe you are referring to using indirect cost rates to determine funding. Do you know that there is a big difference between indirect cost rates and actual indirect recovery?

This is a plot of indirect cost RATES for fiscal year 2024. Since your performance was at an overtly political event, I have color-coded this with blue for the states that voted for Vice President Harris and red for states that voted for President Trump.



This does show that blue states tend to have higher indirect cost rates.

But if you look at actual indirect cost recovery (which are lower since some costs are excluded from indirect cost calculations, the result is below:



The spread is much smaller. Given this, the cost savings to the government by overtly using factors other than peer review scores and institute scientific priorities are likely to be quite small.

The institutions with the highest indirect cost rates are predominantly children's hospitals. Their rates tend to be high because of the high administrative costs of pediatric research, required for patient protection (which you also spoke about). As free-standing hospitals rather than institutions of higher education they are not subject to OMB circular A-21 and the cap on administrative costs at 26% that have been in place since 2003. Further, the indirect cost recoveries for these institutions is only slightly higher than those for other institutions due to exclusion of patient care costs from indirect cost calculations.

It would be good for you, with your PhD in economics, to learn the facts about indirect costs which you embarrassingly referred to as "kind of a tip" during your confirmation hearing.

(3) Why were you speaking at CPAC at all?

You have said on many occasions that you wanted to depoliticize NIH. Yet, here you are giving an inflammatory and misleading performance at one of the most overtly political events in the country. I believe you were invited to speak at a rally after you met with some of the signers of the Bethesda Declaration but declined because 'they had made it political' by inviting local politicians to speak about their appreciation for NIH. I guess your standard about what constitutes an undesirably political event has evolved (or depends on the partisan positions of the politicians).

If you want to be a public servant and a scientist, I would urge you to master the facts associated with your job and to try to share those without distortion. If you would rather be a politician, you should run for office or get a job working (full-time) for think tanks aligned with your political leanings.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M Berg, NIGMS Director, 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Statements about the Bethesda Declaration signers

On a podcast, Director Bhattacharya was asked about the Bethesda Declaration. He said that he had met with (some of) the signers and that “they wanted more DEI funding”. Based on the Bethesda Declaration, on my direct interactions with the signers, and public reporting, it is clear that this is a substantial misrepresentation of the breadth and depth of the issues raised. I wrote to him to point out his bad faith in mischaracterizing their concerns so that it was easy for him to dismiss them as political.

April 26, 2026

Good Faith/Bad Faith

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

Someone shared a link to your appearance on the “Smart Girl Dumb Questions” podcast from January. The host asked you about the Bethesda Declaration and you indicated that you had met with the signers. You dismissively said “they wanted more DEI funding”. Your lack of respect for NIH staff is striking and offensive. To remind you, the Bethesda Declaration including concerns about a number of actions of the administration including that they had:

- 1) Politicized research by halting high-quality, peer reviewed grants and contracts;
 - Health disparities.
 - COVID-19, long COVID, and immunization.
 - Health impacts of climate change.
 - Gender identity, sexual health, and the needs of intersex people in the U.S.
 - Broad participation in biomedical research.
- 2) Interrupted global collaboration;
- 3) Undermined peer review;
- 4) Tried to enact a blanket 15% cap on indirect costs;
- 5) Fired essential NIH staff.

This is much broader than “DEI” (although developing a biomedical workforce representative of the American population is an important and long-standing goal of NIH). Given that the grant disruptions and terminations were found to be illegal (a finding affirmed by the Supreme Court) as was the 15% cap on indirect costs (recently affirmed on final appeal), it seems that some of their concerns were well founded.

As a high-level government official, at least you didn’t call for a “a quick and devastating published take down” of the premises of the Bethesda Declaration. That would have been inappropriate and intolerable. You just casually misrepresented and dismissed them. I also listened to your Fireside Chat at the recent National Academy event. There, you described concerns raised in the press about slow grant making in Fiscal Year 2026 as “ridiculous” and accused reporters who worked on these articles as “politicized attacks”. I understand that grant making was delayed by the two-month government shutdown and

that NIH staff has done a good job trying to catch up, particularly on non-competitive renewal awards. While NIH is almost caught up to the Fiscal Year 2025 level, there are still hundreds of non-competitive renewals that are more than 3 months late. With regard to new and competitive renewal awards, NIH had made ~2300 awards in Fiscal Year 2026 compared to ~3800 in Fiscal Year 2025 and ~5600 in Fiscal Year 2024 through the same date. This is a substantial gap that I hope is closed quickly.

These delays in making awards have real consequences on science and on the investigators who conduct the research. To dismiss good-faith efforts by members of the press to report consequential facts accurately as “ridiculous” reveals a lack of good faith on your part.

I sincerely hope that you will try to do better. The hypocrisy in how you respond to what you see as attacks against your ideas and how you attack the ideas of others is quite striking.

Sincerely yours,
Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

The CDC COVID vaccine study

One February 18th, Director Bhattacharya had been named as Acting Commissioner of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) while continuing to serve as NIH Director. This was not reassuring as each of these are (or should be) more than full-time jobs. One of his early acts was blocking the release of a report prepared by CDC staff about the effectiveness of COVID vaccines.

The National Institute of Medicine (NAM) (of which I am an elected member) organized a workshop on scientific integrity. Given Director Bhattacharya’s actions, many, including me, were critical of NAM giving him a platform to speak without being substantially challenged. During the discussion, a question did arise about the basis for his decision to block the release of the report. I wrote to him regarding his comments.

April 28, 2026

COVID vaccine study

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

During the recent National Academy of Medicine workshop, you explained your decision to withhold the CDC report on COVID vaccine effectiveness by saying it was a poor study design. Your Fireside Chat companion (also an economist) rapidly agreed.

I would note that neither of you are epidemiologists (although you have been accused of being one), nor am I. But I am aware that this study design has been the subject of considerable discussion. See, for example, Theoretical Basis of the Test-Negative Study Design for Assessment of Influenza Vaccine Effectiveness (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5013887/pdf/kww064.pdf>).

There is also an editorial (more critical) in the same issue of **Practice of Epidemiology**.

If your goal is to increase public trust in yourself and the CDC, it would seem to me to have been wiser to issue a statement explaining that you had methodological concerns about the study and that CDC would release a report by such-and-such a date. As it is, you just fed the narrative that you were suppressing information about COVID vaccine effectiveness for your own political reasons. This is an understandable narrative given your past record.

Not surprisingly, the report is now publicly available (<https://insidemedicine.substack.com/api/v1/file/ab3d90bd-5bb8-4b2a-bf5e-0eccb93e0230.pdf>). Members of the scientific community are now able to judge for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of the analysis and the firmness of the conclusions. Time will tell what their conclusions will be and how they will be shared.

You are the beneficiary of considerable scientific training. You should try to use this in a thoughtful manner if you are to restore the trust you claim to care so much about.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I did not receive a response.

Continued promotion of Matt Ridley and the lab leak theory

Director Bhattacharya retweeted a post from Matt Ridley continuing to promote his lab leak ideas. Director Bhattacharya takes Ridley's arguments without any critical analysis of their validity and, hence, promotes what is basically a conspiracy theory rather than a scientific analysis. I wrote to him to point out that if he wanted to be considered a scientist, he needed to act like one.


May 27, 2026

Scientist or conspiracy theorist. You must choose.

Dear Director Bhattacharya:

I saw that you recently retweeted a post from Matt Ridley whom you invited to give the inaugural "Scientific Freedom Lecture".

Jay Bhattacharya retweeted

 **Matt Ridley** @mattwridley 20h

I have been told someone found my lecture persuasive until they spoke to a virologist who said: "lots of viruses have furin cleavage sites".

Repeat after me, slowly:

SARS-COV-2 IS THE ONLY SARBECOVIRUS EVER FOUND WITH A FURIN CLEAVAGE SITE.


OUT OF SEVERAL HUNDRED STRAINS.

"inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory"

furin cleavage site

GX_P1E	I	C	A	S	Y	H	S	M	S	S	L	-	-	-	R	S	V	N	Q	R	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
GX_P2V	I	C	A	S	Y	H	S	M	S	S	F	-	-	-	R	S	V	N	Q	R	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
RaTG13	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	A	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
SARS-CoV-2	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	F	R	R	A	R	S	V	A	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G
BANAL-20-52	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	A	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
RShSTT182	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	T	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
RShSTT200	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	T	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
BANAL-20-103	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	A	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
BANAL-20-236	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	A	S	Q	S	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
SM44-9	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	S	S	Q	A	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
A22-2	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	S	S	Q	A	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
SM79-9	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	S	S	Q	A	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
FM45-9	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	S	S	Q	A	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
GD_1	I	C	A	S	Y	Q	T	Q	T	N	S	-	-	-	R	S	V	S	S	Q	A	I	I	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
ZC45	I	C	A	S	Y	H	T	A	S	I	L	-	-	-	R	S	T	S	Q	K	A	I	V	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
ZXC21	I	C	A	S	Y	H	T	A	S	I	L	-	-	-	R	S	T	G	Q	K	A	I	V	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
PrC31	I	C	A	S	Y	H	T	A	S	I	L	-	-	-	R	S	T	S	Q	K	A	I	V	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	
RpYN06	I	C	A	S	Y	H	A	A	S	I	L	-	-	-	R	S	T	S	Q	K	A	I	V	A	Y	T	M	S	L	G	

Adapted from Figure 1 of Chan YA and Zhan SH, *Mol Biol Evol* 39:msab327 (2021).

 **Matt Ridley** @mattwridley Mar 27

In my lecture at @NIH, at the invitation of @NIHDirector_Jay, I explained why I changed my mind from thinking the lab leak theory of covid origins was unlikely to thinking it was almost certainly true.

Please watch and assess the evidence yourself.

videocast.nih.gov/watch/2444...

He notes (with condescending emphasis) that SARS-CoV-2 is the only serbecovirus with a furin cleavage site. He does not note that furin cleavage sites are common in other coronaviruses (see, for example, "Furin cleavage sites in the spike proteins of bat and rodent coronaviruses: Implications for virus evolution and zoonotic transfer from rodent species"

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352771421000720?via%3Dihub>) and other publications.

To quote Lord Ridley:

Repeat after me, slowly.

You must choose whether you are going to be a scientist or a conspiracy theorist.

By promoting Ridley's cherry-picked data and not critically examining other available data about coronavirus evolution and the role of furin cleavage sites, you are not behaving as a serious scientist, let alone one who promotes Gold_Standard_Science™.

You have been entrusted with stewardship of the National Institutes of Health. If you want people to trust you and NIH, and to encourage them to actually examine available (rather than selected data chosen to promote particularly political agendas), you need to do better.

I would hope you would use the privilege that you have of having substantial scientific training for good. I hope you would not favorably review and promote a paper where the authors selectively cite one set of data without doing even a cursory review of other readily available literature. Unfortunately, your behavior, including this recent episode, suggests otherwise.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy M. Berg
Director, NIGMS 2003-2011

I do not expect a response.

