A Small Texas Think Tank Cultivated COVID Dissidents. Now They're Running US Health Policy

Many of the new CDC vaccine advisors share a connection to a little-known think tank: the Brownstone Institute.

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Martin Kulldorff, chair of the Trump administration's reconstituted CDC vaccine panel, made a shocking — and misleading — statement as the group met in September. Referring to a clinical trial, Kulldorff, a biostatistician and former professor at Harvard Medical School, said eight babies born to women who received Pfizer's COVID vaccine while pregnant had birth defects, compared with two born to unvaccinated women.

"It is very concerning to have a fourfold excess risk of birth defects in these pregnant women," Kulldorff then said.

Scientists criticized Kulldorff's questions and remarks in that meeting because they suggested that the vaccine caused birth defects, which is not supported by evidence. The birth defects would have occurred before the women received the vaccine, the scientists said. They say it was one of several scientifically unsubstantiated claims by newly appointed members of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, an influential panel that guides which vaccines millions of people receive and whether insurance covers their cost.

Many of the new panel members share a connection to a little-known think tank making its mark in President Donald Trump's Washington: the Brownstone Institute.

Libertarian author Jeffrey Tucker created the nonprofit institute in 2021, fueled by backlash against COVID lockdowns and other pandemic-era policies. "You cannot do something like that to the world and expect people just to sit by and go, 'OK, that's normal,'" Tucker said in an interview.

Tucker has endorsed child labor; said of COVID shots that "there is no evidence at all that the vaccines saved millions," contradicting numerous studies showing the opposite; and opposes vaccine mandates.

His institute's COVID contrarians seek to limit the government's role in protecting Americans from disease. The Austin, Texas-based think tank has received millions from donors whose identities are shielded in tax filings. And in recent months, its associates have catapulted to the highest levels of government.

At least eight people with ties to the Brownstone Institute hold or recently held senior positions at federal health agencies or key roles advising the government, exercising significant authority over access to vaccines and scientific research.

They include Jay Bhattacharya, director of the National Institutes of Health, which has been racked by funding cuts and firings under the Trump administration, as well as senior Food and Drug Administration officials Vinay Prasad and Tracy Beth Høeg. Prasad has been involved in restricting the use of COVID vaccines. Høeg has voiced skepticism about vaccine mandates and some childhood immunizations.

Bhattacharya was a senior scholar for the organization. Brownstone has published Bhattacharya's and Prasad's writings on its website. Høeg has reported receiving payment from the group.

The institute has compensated Kulldorff and published his articles. Tucker wrote in October that 2020 marked "the beginning of a long friendship" with Kulldorff "that continues to this day." Three other ACIP members share connections with the organization: MIT operations management professor Retsef Levi, who has spoken as part of at least one Brownstone event; physician Robert Malone, who speaks at its events and whose articles appear on its website; and Case Western Reserve University professor and epidemiologist Catherine Stein, who in 2022 authored an article calling for an end to vaccine mandates at universities.

Thomas Buckley, a public relations professional who wrote for the institute, accepted a political appointment as a top NIH spokesperson after thousands of workers at the biomedical research agency were fired. Buckley noted on Substack that his Brownstone writings "led to my new job."

"That's maybe his judgment," Tucker said.

Buckley, when asked to elaborate, said in an email that he interviewed Bhattacharya "for a story that was later published on Brownstone — it was simply me being polite." He said he resigned from the NIH on September 30. NIH spokesperson Laci Williams declined to confirm his departure date.

Despite the ascendance of those with ties to his group, Tucker said that "anybody who thinks that somehow Brownstone is some big plot, it's crazy." He said he is not in regular contact with Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose department oversees the CDC, FDA, and NIH.

"I don't have any influence," Tucker said.

Sowing Vaccine Doubt

People with ties to the institute have sown doubt about COVID vaccines or routine childhood immunizations, dismissing widespread evidence that they are safe and the benefits outweigh the risks.

“They’ve successfully placed their ideology inside the mechanism that determines U.S. vaccine policy,” said Jake Scott, a physician at Stanford Medicine who specializes in infectious diseases. “It’s very, very troubling.”

Tucker said that Brownstone “doesn’t have any operational impact on the ACIP committee at all” and that “if somebody wasn’t troubled by Brownstone, there’s probably no reason for us to exist.”

Tucker and Brownstone’s associates express libertarian views and promote distrust of government, including public health authorities.

“The evidence is mounting and indisputable that mRNA vaccines cause serious harm including death, especially among young people. We have to stop giving them immediately!” Levi posted on social media in 2023, referring to vaccines based on messenger RNA technology, which Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna used to develop their COVID shots. Stein wrote that COVID vaccine mandates are “unethical” and not scientifically justified. Bhattacharya asserted on a podcast with Trump ally Stephen Bannon that mRNA technology for vaccines is “no longer viable,” and he has overseen mass terminations of NIH grants for scientific research.

Kennedy in June fired all 17 members of the CDC’s vaccine panel and has replaced them with 12 people so far, including individuals with connections to the Brownstone Institute. Tucker said that he did not propose to the White House or HHS that they be appointed and that Brownstone has not paid them over the past year.

During the September ACIP meeting, several new panel members expressed skepticism of vaccines and dismissed evidence — including the CDC’s own data — demonstrating that they are safe and effective.

That included Kulldorff’s questions and remarks about COVID vaccines and birth defects.

In a Pfizer clinical trial, hundreds of pregnant women were given COVID vaccines or a placebo during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. But the birth defects Pfizer reported in its clinical study typically would have formed long before the vaccine was given, said Jeffrey Morris, a biostatistics and public health professor at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine.

“To say that this is a major safety risk,” Morris said, “is beyond a stretch.”

“This one really upsets me because it’s just so misleading,” he said.

Multiple large studies have shown no association between COVID vaccines and miscarriage, stillbirth, or birth defects.

In response to questions for this article, Kulldorff said: “In the randomized trial, there were four times as many birth defects in children born to mothers receiving the Pfizer COVID vaccine during pregnancy compared to the placebo-receiving control group. To ensure vaccine confidence, it is the responsibility of ACIP to note and inquire about such discrepancies, and it is the manufacturer’s responsibility to thoroughly examine it through additional follow-up studies.”

Kulldorff said he is “not affiliated with the Brownstone Institute” but declined to respond to additional questions, including whether he is currently compensated by the organization or has donated to it. The Brownstone Institute paid Kulldorff $108,333 in 2022, according to tax filings.

Levi said he heard about the Brownstone Institute from social media. He said he is in contact with Tucker “once in a while” but said Tucker has not advised him on vaccines since he was named to the CDC’s vaccine panel. Levi said he has “never received any compensation,” “never had any affiliation,” and “never donated or given any money” to the group.

Bhattacharya did not respond to questions. Williams, the NIH spokesperson, who had earlier declined to respond, citing the federal government shutdown, did not respond to a query seeking comment after the shutdown ended November 12.

Stein declined to comment and referred questions to HHS. Department spokesperson Andrew Nixon said in a statement that Stein’s ACIP appointment “reflects the Administration’s commitment to independent, evidence-based science. Her professional record speaks for itself.”

The Brownstone Institute’s website says it works “to support writers, lawyers, scientists, economists, and other people of courage who have been professionally purged and displaced during the upheaval of our times.”

“There’s a danger associated with a state-imposed orthodoxy,” Tucker said in the interview. “I think Brownstone has a moral obligation to care for dissidents and create settings in which they’re able to test their ideas against people with whom they disagree.”

He said that “there’s never harm that comes from open debate and open distribution of information and views.” But Brownstone’s critics say its associates make extreme claims about vaccines and promote anti-vaccine messages.

“They kind of position themselves as defending freedom, but they consistently platform covid minimizers and vaccine skeptics,” Scott said.

Tucker took issue with the description, saying “it presumes that we know exactly with scientific precision the severity of covid, and so anybody who falls short of explaining that with amazing precision is a minimizer.”

In early September, Scott testified at a Senate subcommittee hearing on vaccines alongside Toby Rogers, a political economist and Brownstone Institute fellow who doesn't list any medical credentials. Rogers wrote last year in his Substack newsletter that "vaccines are a civilization-destroying technology" and has promoted the debunked idea that vaccines cause autism. "My belief is that the autism and chronic disease epidemics are primarily caused by toxicants — mostly from vaccines and about a dozen additional toxicants," Rogers said at the Senate hearing. Numerous studies have shown there is no link between vaccines and autism.

Days later, members of Kennedy's handpicked panel of CDC vaccine advisers "spent hours elevating these theories" about vaccines "that are not really based in solid evidence or high-quality studies," Scott said. "They manufactured doubt about established vaccines, entertained all this speculation without any evidence — that's the real damage."

Levi, responding to that criticism, said: "For the first time in a long time we are issuing objective, evidence-based immunization recommendations through ACIP with honest and transparent discussion of the benefits, risks, and uncertainties."

As the panel weighed whether to delay the hepatitis B shot given to most newborns, Høeg, a senior adviser for clinical sciences at the FDA, questioned whether the vaccine is safe. "We should have some humility and consider that we may not know all of the potential safety issues," she said to the CDC panel.

Widespread evidence shows that the hepatitis B newborn dose is safe and that the shot has very few side effects. Starting in 1991, the CDC recommended that the first of three shots of hepatitis B vaccine be given to infants shortly after birth. The move virtually eliminated the potentially fatal disease among American children. Babies infected with the virus at birth have a 90% chance of developing chronic hepatitis B.

In academic journals, Høeg has disclosed receiving payment from the Brownstone Institute but did not specify the amount. She has described Tucker as "a good friend." Høeg did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

In an email, the FDA's Prasad said that he "has received no money from Brownstone or any person(s) affiliated" and that all his content published on its website "was republished from his own personal Substack."

Tucker said he has not advised Prasad or Høeg on vaccines since they became FDA officials. He described the latest CDC vaccine panel meeting as "a breath of fresh air."

The COVID Contrarian Clubhouse

The Brownstone Institute, on its website, previously called itself "the spiritual child of the Great Barrington Declaration," the controversial pandemic treatise Bhattacharya, Kulldorff, and Oxford University epidemiologist Sunetra Gupta co-authored in October 2020 that argued against lockdown measures to prevent the covid virus from spreading.

They proposed that widespread immunity against COVID could be achieved by allowing healthy people to get infected, known as herd immunity, with protective measures instituted for medically vulnerable people.

The proposal was criticized at the time by many public health experts and high-ranking government officials, including then-NIH director Francis Collins, who called its authors "fringe epidemiologists," according to emails the American Institute for Economic Research obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. (Tucker was AIER editorial director from 2017 to 2021.)

"They've been willing to publish articles of some very extreme anti-vaccine people," Dorit Reiss, a professor at University of California Law-San Francisco focused on vaccine-related legal and policy issues, said of the Brownstone Institute. "They're trying to give a more respectable veneer to the result of the Great Barrington Declaration," she added.

In response, Tucker said: "I don't think being an extremist is a good basis on which to shut somebody's thoughts down. We need provocations."

Tucker said he did not propose that Bhattacharya — who was a senior scholar at the institute and wrote 29 articles from July 2021 through October 2024 — be nominated to lead the NIH. More than one-third of the articles were co-authored with Kulldorff, who became Brownstone's senior scientific director in November 2021.

Kulldorff told National Review he was fired from the Harvard-affiliated Mass General Brigham hospital system and placed on leave at the university that month after he refused to be vaccinated against COVID, saying he had natural immunity. Kulldorff said he was hospitalized for a COVID infection in early 2021.

The Brownstone Institute reported nearly $7.4 million in contributions, grants, and other payments between 2021 and 2024, with about 35% coming from tax-exempt foundations and donor-advised funds, according to an analysis of tax filings. Donor-advised funds allow people to secure tax deductions for anonymous charitable contributions. Tucker said the organization has 17,000 donors, most of them small, but declined to elaborate on funders.

The filings show the institute has also received funding from foundations run by people with backgrounds in business, including in tech, finance, law, and banking. According to a review of tax records, many of them have also given to anti-vaccine organizations; groups such as the Independent Medical Alliance, which promoted ineffective treatments for COVID; or prominent organizations in conservative politics, such as the Federalist Society, the Alliance Defending Freedom, and the Heritage Foundation. Brownstone in 2023 received $67,350 from Donors Trust Inc., which funds conservative causes.

As of 2024, the Brownstone Institute's board included David Stockman, a White House budget chief under President Ronald Reagan; libertarian economist Donald Boudreaux; and Roger Ver, an investor known as "Bitcoin Jesus."

Ver's website said he gave more than $1 million to the institute.

In 2024, Ver was indicted by a federal grand jury for allegedly committing tax fraud costing the IRS at least $48 million. On Oct. 14, the Justice Department announced that Ver had entered into a deferred prosecution agreement to resolve federal tax charges against him and has paid the IRS nearly $50 million. The government has moved to dismiss the indictment against him.

'People Are Very Skeptical'

Other than publishing posts on its website, the institute awards fellowships and convenes conferences and retreats. Its associates testify in front of Congress. And it holds a "Supper Club" series in cities throughout the country.

"The goal of Brownstone is to make possible wide-ranging conversations about the failure of the system and the solutions to it," Tucker said.

Ashley Grogg, a registered nurse and founder of Hoosiers for Medical Liberty, spoke at a Supper Club in August on "informed decision-making," primarily about vaccines.

"People are very skeptical," Grogg said in an interview. "How do we trust people moving forward? Do we really think that we can trust the new leadership that's coming in to do the right thing?"

She said she was connected to Brownstone through one of her members. Grogg said she does not think newborns should universally be given the hepatitis B vaccine shortly after birth and opposes vaccine mandates. "I don't want to take anything away from anybody," but people who refuse to be vaccinated should not be "withheld from society," Grogg said.

In September, as the CDC's vaccine advisers met, Tucker took to the social media platform X to amplify statements questioning vaccines, including from panel members with ties to the group he created. One was Malone saying, "It's clear that a significant population in the United States has significant concerns about vaccine policy and about vaccine mandates." Another was from Levi, who, referring to covid vaccines, said, "Most of us are extremely concerned about the safety and the lack of robust evidence both on safety and efficacy for not only pregnant women, but their babies."

There is strong evidence that mRNA and non-mRNA COVID vaccines are safe for pregnant women. A mother's vaccination while pregnant also helps protect newborns. CDC data that drew upon medical records in 12 states found that nearly 90% of babies who were hospitalized with COVID had mothers who did not get the vaccine while pregnant.

In response to questions for this article, Levi said in an email that "the claim that there is strong evidence for the efficacy and safety of COVID vaccination during pregnancy in the absence of appropriate clinical trials is not consistent with fundamental regulatory principles" and that panel members "were also concerned by the potential safety signal in the single (small) clinical trial that was conducted, and other research." Malone did not respond to questions for this article.

Kulldorff, the ACIP chair, said the panel will review vaccines given during pregnancy, childhood, and adolescence.

Less than a week after the ACIP meeting in Atlanta, Levi gave a Brownstone Institute talk about artificial intelligence systems.

Brownstone was a sponsor this month when Children's Health Defense, a leading anti-vaccine nonprofit founded by Kennedy, held its annual conference in Austin.

And during the institute's own annual conference recently in Utah, Bhattacharya was one of three people who received its first "Brownstone Prize."

"I would think it represents a kind of integrity and courage in public life," Tucker said, "and stand up for what you believe is the truth, even at some degree of personal risk."

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http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/article/small-texas-think-tank-cultivated-covid-dissidents-now-running-us-health-policy