



Trump Awards \$1.6M to “Unethical” Hepatitis B Vaccine Study in Africa

The study will be led by Danish researchers who have produced questionable findings on vaccine effects.

December 22, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

The Trump administration announced it will fund a \$1.6 million study on [hepatitis B virus](#) (HBV) vaccination among newborns in Africa that scientists call “highly unethical” and “extremely risky,” according to [The Guardian](#).

The study will be led by researchers from the University of Southern Denmark, including married couple Christine Stabell Benn and Peter Aaby, of the Bandim Health Project, who have in the past published questionable [vaccine research](#) that has been met with opposition by mainstream scientists.

With support from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) award](#), investigators will conduct a single-blind clinical trial of the [HBV vaccine](#) in newborns in Guinea-Bissau, a small country in West Africa where nearly one in five people have HBV.

HBV is a highly contagious viral infection that can cause liver damage or liver cancer. The virus is easily spread via hep B-positive blood, semen or other body fluid. Indeed, 90% of babies infected in their first year of life will develop chronic infection that can lead to liver failure and death, [according to Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#). Vaccination is the best way to prevent HBV infection.

The award comes shortly after the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, recently reconstituted by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., voted to no longer recommend that all infants should receive their first dose of the vaccine immediately after birth. Instead, the committee recommends it only for babies whose mothers test positive for HBV or whose status is unknown. Mothers who test HBV negative are advised to consult their doctors and make an individual decision.

“[Kennedy] has a fixed, immutable belief that vaccines cause harm,” said Paul Offit, MD, director of the Vaccine Education Center and an attending physician at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, according to The Guardian. “He will do everything he can to try and prove that.”

For more than three decades, Benn and Aaby have conducted randomized trials involving thousands of children in Guinea-Bissau and Denmark to demonstrate so-called nonspecific vaccine effects, meaning whether vaccines provide additional protection against diseases other than the one they are designed to prevent, according to an Aarhus University [new release](#).

A recent [comprehensive Danish review](#) examining Benn and Aaby’s research practices found that they were unable to demonstrate nonspecific effects for vaccinations against diseases such as measles, tuberculosis and whooping cough.

“It is concerning that such a prominent research group has conducted so many randomized trials over such a long period without finding real results,” said Henrik Støvring, DMSc, of Steno Diabetes Center Aarhus and Aarhus University, who led the review, in the release. “Randomized trials are normally considered the gold standard in medical research, so if they do not show anything, one should be very cautious about presenting it as convincing evidence.”

Støvring also found that the researchers purposely selected and highlighted results supporting their theories. At the same time, they downplayed their inability to confirm the primary hypotheses the trials were meant to test.

For the new study, the Danish researchers will compare early-life mortality, illness and development between babies who receive the HBV vaccine at birth and babies who don’t. The study does not appear to be examining whether the vaccine is more effective at birth but rather whether there are “overall health effects” when given at birth.

“This announcement has set alarm bells ringing in the global health community,” said Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

McKee called the study a symptom of “a policy desperately searching for evidence.”

“It is not clear what the research question is,” he said. “It seems to be about the safety of the

vaccine rather than its effectiveness, but both are already well established, and to undertake such a study in a population where almost one in five of the adult population has a marker of infection seems extremely risky.”

Scientists also argue against the withholding of a vaccine that has proved to be safe and effective.

“It’s highly unethical to choose to give a vaccine to some children but not others,” Offit said.

To read more, click [#Hepatitis B](#) or [#Hepatitis B Vaccine](#). There, you’ll see headlines such as “[Vaccine Panel’s Hepatitis B Vote Signals Further Turbulence for Immunization Policy, Public Trust](#),” “[RFK Jr. Wants to Delay the Hepatitis B Vaccine. Here’s What Parents Need to Know](#)” and Hep’s [Health Basics on Hepatitis B Prevention](#).

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