

Science under Siege: The Wellness and Health Freedom Empire

MICHAEL E. MANN AND PETER J. HOTEZ

Editor's note: This article is excerpted from chapter 4, "The Pros," in the forthcoming book Science under Siege: How to Fight the Five Most Powerful Forces That Threaten Our World by Michael E. Mann and Peter J. Hotez. We are grateful to the authors and Public Affairs, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc., for letting us publish this excerpt in SKEPTICAL INQUIRER a couple weeks before the book is released.

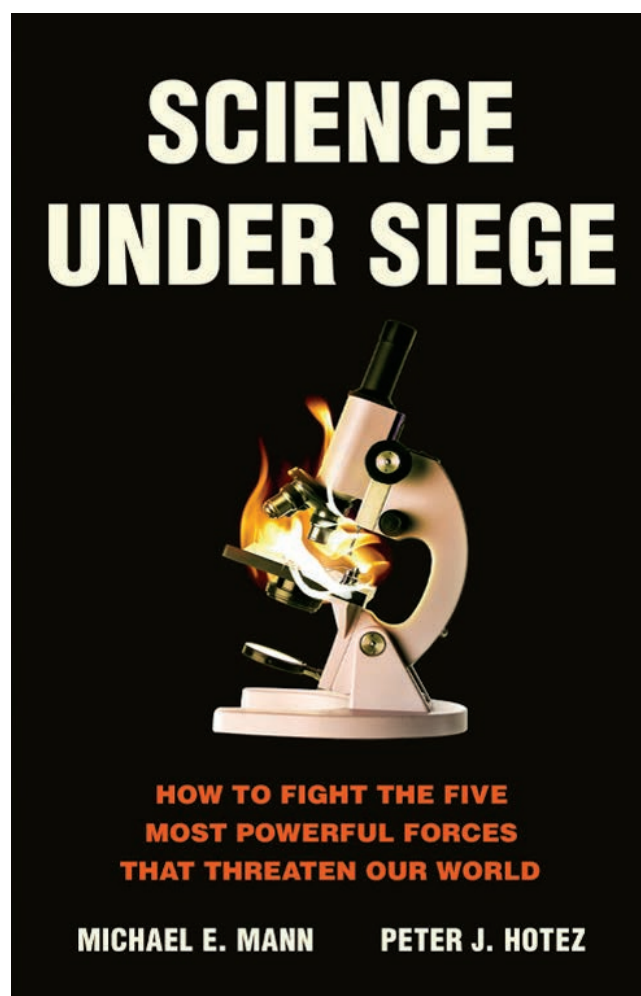
Propped up by his flawed claim of a linkage between mercury and vaccines, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. founded the World Mercury Project, which in 2018 expanded to become today's Children's Health Defense, one of the most influential antivaccine organizations there is (Weir 2021). RFK Jr. previously served as chairman and chief litigation counsel. He also promotes conspiracies and scientifically unproven theories regarding other environmental causes of chronic illnesses, including Wi-Fi and 5G radiation as causes of cancer, antidepressants, and school shootings (McDonald 2023). According to Jessica McDonald from the Penn Anenberg Public Policy Center's FactCheck.org:

An undercurrent to many of Kennedy's science-based claims is that he is uniquely positioned to understand the science, whereas actual scientists are not. "I don't necessarily believe all the scientists, because I can read science myself," he told the New Yorker in July, just after misrepresenting the science of the COVID-19 vaccines. "That's what I do for a living. I read science critically."

But time and time again, a review of the evidence contradicts Kennedy's views. He misrepresents major conclusions from papers and gets other details wrong. He conveniently ignores the scientific literature—often vast, and of higher quality—that runs counter to his beliefs. He misleads on vaccine law and misunderstands key governmental programs, consistently viewing them through a lens of conspiracy and corruption. (McDonald 2023)

An illustration of how he cherry-picks facts and factoids to produce fantasy narratives is provided by his comments about Peter [one of the authors of this book excerpt] in his 2021 book, *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health*, published by his Children's Health Defense organization and Skyhorse Publishing (Kennedy Jr. 2021). In the book, he misrepresents Peter's actions, dismissing him as a "CNN television doctor" and risibly claiming he has sought to make criticism of Fauci a felony and that Fauci and Bill Gates have made some sort of secret deal to hand him millions of dollars. He has also tried to link Peter to big pharma.

Debunking RFK Jr.'s statements is straightforward. As one of the few scientists in America who had been developing coronavirus vaccines for more than a decade, Peter was a



frequently invited guest on the cable news channels to discuss COVID-19 during the pandemic. Without receiving any payment for any interview, he appeared regularly on MSNBC, CNN, *PBS NewsHour*, CBS, ABC, NBC, and even Fox News. He also appeared regularly on local news outlets in Texas. RFK Jr.'s characterization of Peter as a "CNN television doctor" diminishes his role as a scientist who co-led the development of a low-cost COVID vaccine for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs; as highlighted in Chapter 1, "The 1-2-3 Punch"). His comment about Peter regarding hate-crimes protection is similarly disingenuous—Peter's actual comments were in regard to protecting professional scientists from political attacks or threats to themselves and their families (Hotez 2021).

Regarding the millions of dollars he's allegedly taken from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH): The NIAID is one of twenty-seven research institutes and centers of the NIH and is the world's largest supporter of infectious-disease scientific research. Almost every major scientist in America who studies microbes and infectious diseases applies for research grants from the NIAID. These grants are peer-reviewed by an external advisory committee of experts who are selected from universities and research institutes across the country. The grants are then scored and ranked and are considered highly competitive. An NIH institute director typically has no role in influencing this decision. In terms of support from Bill Gates, Peter's university has indeed received previous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop a hookworm-anemia vaccine (as noted in Chapter 2, "The Plutocrats"), which is now completing clinical trials. This would be an extraordinary technology for addressing disease and poverty in LMICs and would become the second parasitic-disease vaccine in clinical use after the malaria vaccine (Puchner et al. 2023). Finally, for the implication that Peter is connected with "big pharma," the reality is quite the opposite, as Peter and his team of scientists have received international acclaim for finding ways to develop vaccines without involving the multinational pharma companies (Palca 2022; Goozner 2023).

In 2023, two journalists investigated the financial support of RFK Jr.'s Children's Health Defense to uncover a complex web of finance organizations with no obvious subject-matter interest in Children's Health Defense's antivaccine mission. These included Fidelity Charitable, a 501(c)(3) public charity that donated \$1 million to Children's Health Defense in 2021–2022, as well as \$235,000 to Del Bigtree's Informed Consent Action Network (Bragman and Kotch 2021). Bigtree is a prominent antivaccine activist and was asked to serve as RFK Jr.'s communication director for his 2024 US presidential bid (Alfred 2024). Ultimately, Bragman and Kotch identified more than \$15 million in donor-advised funds (DAFs) provided to antivaccine activist groups. DAFs can operate as pass-through organizations, allowing wealthy individuals or foundations to distribute funds quietly, or "under the radar": "DAFs are a common vehicle for funding entities like hate groups—or Covid-misinformation operations" (Bragman and Kotch 2021), and can serve as one form of what is commonly referred to as "dark money."

Next-Gen Pros

The health-freedom movement today extends beyond Joseph Mercola (Frenkel 2021), RFK Jr., and the other members of the Disinformation Dozen to include doctors associated with alternative or contrarian medical professional societies and groups. Besides the central tenets of health freedom, these organizations lean heavily on promoting spectacular cures for COVID-19 and other conditions, including ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine, despite the overwhelming evidence that these have no pharmacological benefits for COVID-19 (Bramante et al. 2022; Reis et al. 2022; Temple et al. 2021; Naggie et al. 2023; López-Medina et al. 2021), and even evidence that hydroxychloroquine itself is toxic or could

become a significant cause of death during the pandemic (Pradelle et al. 2024). Among these organizations is America's Frontline Doctors (AFLD), whose website home page boasts "Protecting Your Medical Freedom," while touting itself as "the nation's premier Civil Liberties Organization." *Time* characterized it as a "right-wing anti-vaccine group that claimed the U.S. government was suppressing effective treatments, hospitals were killing COVID patients, and vaccines for the virus caused cancer" (Bergengruen 2023). According to the *Intercept*, AFLD has made millions of dollars through online consultations and hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin prescriptions. The *Intercept* states, "America's Frontline Doctors . . . is working in tandem with a small network of health care companies to sow distrust in the Covid-19 vaccine, dupe tens of thousands of people into seeking ineffective treatments for the disease, and then sell consultations and millions of dollars' worth of those medications" (Lee 2021). In a disturbing article, "What Price Was My Father's Life Worth?" interviewing Julie Moore about her father's choice to take ivermectin shipped to his home after a \$90 telemedicine consultation with AFLD, *Time* writes:

In his final days, Moore could only watch through the glass as her dad battled delirium, trying to tear off his oxygen mask in a panic. "The worst patients we've seen are the ones that delayed treatment because they were self-medicating through ivermectin," Moore says a nurse told her. "You wouldn't believe how many people we've treated who have done this." When Moore asked if any of those patients left the hospital, the nurses shook their heads no.

The extent of what Moore calls her dad's "death by deception" only became clear after he died. In his office, she found emails and documents from AFLD outlining their "COVID protocol," printed out and annotated with characteristic meticulousness. "My dad was a highly intelligent man. He was a fantastic pharmacist," Moore says. "But he was also 82. They were very convincing, and they were lying." (Bergengruen 2023)

One individual with past connections to AFLD is Dr. Joseph Ladapo, the current Florida surgeon general under Governor Ron DeSantis (Bachman and Rooney 2021), who in January 2024 warned the public in Florida against taking mRNA vaccines for COVID because he claimed they could modify an individual's DNA or be linked to cancer (Florida Health 2024, Luscombe 2024). Ladapo publicly denounced mRNA vaccines as "the anti-Christ of all products" (Storobinsky 2024), an act that was widely condemned by the mainstream scientific community (Diamond et al. 2024). Peter went on several news broadcasts to provide the scientific context for understanding why Ladapo was wrong (Storobinsky 2024). So we increasingly saw during the pandemic how health-freedom propaganda took a two-fisted approach—both disparaging vaccines and promoting spectacular cures of unproven value, most notably ivermectin. In November 2023, the AFLD board chair and founder, Dr. Simone Gold, took to Twitter to place Peter on that organization's "Deadly Disinformation Dozen" list (Gold 2023)—an unimaginative and cynical effort at projection. In 2022, Dr. Gold was sentenced to a sixty-day prison term and ordered to pay a fine for storming the Capitol on January 6, 2020. She was granted a full pardon, however, by newly reelected President Trump in January 2025 (Romero 2022; Clark 2025).

Beyond AFLD, another US-based health-freedom organization that promotes the use of ivermectin is the Front Line

COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance (FLCCC), led by two founding presidents, Drs. Paul Marik and Pierre Kory, both internists and critical-care physicians. According to *STAT News* and their investigative reporters: “Ivermectin is highly lucrative for the doctors who sell it. Members of Front Line Covid-19 Critical Care Alliance and America’s Frontline Doctors offer access to the drug online via telemedicine, for high fees, and often without insurance coverage Kory has launched his own ‘advanced Covid-19 care center,’ with a ‘specialized focus’ on long Covid consultations. An online appointment with a member of his team costs \$1,250, which includes an initial video visit and two follow-ups, while meeting with Kory himself costs \$1,650” (Goldhill 2022).

In the meantime, the FLCCC has received DAFs from Vanguard Charitable and Fidelity Charitable (Bragman and Kotch 2021). According to news reports in January 2025, the American Board of Internal Medicine revoked the board certifications of both Drs. Marik and Kory, and possibly other antivaccine physicians who promote ivermectin or other unproven treatments for COVID (Goldhill 2022; Fiore 2025; DePeau-Wilson 2025). Along similar lines is the Wellness Company, described by McGill University as “a striking example of the very lucrative libertarian medical movement that claims to stand against the profit-motivated pharmaceutical industry while replacing drugs with expensive dietary supplement” (Jarry 2023). Some of these physicians linked to such organizations make a practice of denouncing Peter on social media and media platforms. Often, the pros need to call attention to themselves and achieve this by demonizing mainstream scientists or by turning them into soft targets. Stoking the faux-outrage machine to build a base around an esprit de corps, even when it is based on pseudoscience, is another commonly used tactic. In an interesting twist, the FLCCC changed its name in January 2025 to the Independent Medical Alliance, specifying Dr. Joseph Varon as its president and chief medical officer. Dr. Varon is a Houston-area critical-care physician and someone Peter has known and interacted with, maintaining a friendly and collegial relationship, during the COVID pandemic. Possibly, it is a positive sign. One can hope, anyway.

The Brownstone Institute is yet another dark money-funded (Bragman 2023a; Bragman 2023b; Natrass 2023; Gorski 2022) antisience organization that generates health-freedom disinformation. It has been described as a “shadowy dark money group that has been waging information warfare on public health efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic” whose founder and president (as previous editorial director of the American Institute of Economic Research) has worked closely with the Great Barrington Declaration coauthors (Bragman 2023a). Dr. David Gorski, a cancer surgeon and physician-scientist at Wayne State University’s medical school, has reported on their litany of all too familiar antivaccine conspiracies and about COVID origins and their touting of unproven cures (Gorski 2024; Natrass 2023; Bragman 2023b). On its website the Brownstone Institute lists the Independent Medical Alliance as one of the “Friends of Brownstone,” along with the *Epoch Times*, a far-right newspaper linked to the Falun Gong new religious movement (Brownstone Institute n.d.). Their rhetoric is highly conspiratorial in nature, “suggesting that information about [vaccine] side-effects was being suppressed”

(Natrass 2023), while posting articles on its website such as “Conspiracy Theorists Were Right About Climate Lockdowns” and “Contaminated: We’ve Been Their Lab Rats All Along.”

There is a persistent trend of antivaccine activism and COVID misinformation that is linked to the lucrative health-freedom, wellness, and nutritional-supplement industry with historical ties that go back to early America. The movement taps into something much older and more ingrained in the American psyche, but has evolved from the time of Samuel Thomson to become a sophisticated network of shadowy or dark-money groups that promote antivaccine conspiracies and magical or unproven cures and treatments for COVID-19.

The prescient 2011 film *Contagion* imagined a chillingly COVID-like global outbreak, involving a novel zoonotic respiratory virus spread through multiple spillover events from bats to pigs and then to humans. Public health experts work against the clock to develop a vaccine for the virus, which threatens to kill hundreds of millions of people around the world. The key antagonist is antisience conspiracy theorist and blogger Alan Krumwiede, who profits from the online sale of bogus homeopathic cures derived from forsythia, which he falsely claims to have used to cure himself of the virus. Hordes of people seeking forsythia swarm and overwhelm the pharmacies. The lead protagonist, meanwhile, is CDC scientist Dr. Ally Hextall, who develops a successful vaccine and saves the day.

Today’s antivax pros (with considerable help from our media, as we’ll learn in Chapter 6, “The Press”) have managed to perversely flip this script, making public health scientists like Tony Fauci and Peter the villains, while presenting themselves as the heroes. They include members of the Disinformation Dozen and groups such as AFLD and FLCCC, with the Brownstone Institute providing them with quasi-academic and think-tank covers. Social science research has shown the outsize ability of physicians and other credentialed experts to damage public health owing to the trust the public has placed in them. What furthers the damage today is the way the pros are able to make public health misinformation go viral, if you’ll forgive the pun, in the era of social media (Harris et al. 2024). The flow of dark money, including DAFs, is a pernicious new ingredient as well. Walker Bragman and his colleague Alex Kotch deserve enormous credit for tracking the dark-money transfers. One important way to reduce the influence and spread of disinformation by the pros is to better regulate DAFs, demand greater transparency, or, ideally, halt the flow of funds to organizations committed to damaging public health or attacking scientists. However, as Bragman and Kotch point out: “Cutting off the funding spigot could help ... but doing so is no easy task. Although DAF sponsors have full legal control over the funds they distribute, getting them to stop funding anti-vaccine and anti-public health organizations may prove difficult” (Bragman and Kotch 2021). ■

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Michael E. Mann, PhD, is Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of Earth and Environmental Science at the University of Pennsylvania, with a secondary appointment in the Annenberg School for Communication. He also serves as vice provost for Climate Science, Policy, and Action and director of the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media (PCSSM). He contributed, with other Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC) authors, to the work that led to the award of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. He is the author of numerous books, including *Dire Predictions*, *The Madhouse Effect*, *The New Climate War*, and *Our Fragile Moment*.



Peter J. Hotez, MD, PhD, is dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine and professor of Pediatrics and Molecular Virology & Microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine, where he is also the codirector of the Texas Children's Center for Vaccine Development (CVD) and Texas Children's Hospital Endowed Chair of Tropical Pediatrics. He is also University Professor at Baylor University. In 2022, Hotez and his colleague, Dr. Maria Elena Bottazzi, were

nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for "their work to develop and distribute a low-cost COVID-19 vaccine to people of the world without patent limitation." His books include *Blue Marble Health*; *Poverty and the Impact of COVID-19*; *Preventing the Next Pandemic*; *Forgotten People, Forgotten Diseases*; and *The Deadly Rise of Anti-science*.