

Trump cuts send one of Maryland's leading vaccine centers scrambling

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Stefan Kappe, a malaria researcher, was recently named director of the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Stefan Kappe, an internationally recognized malaria researcher, is leading the University of Maryland center in a new direction

With COVID-19 rampaging across the globe in 2020, one of the nation's premier vaccine centers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine was in charge of testing an innovative approach to vaccines.

The [Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health](#)'s work helped stem the crisis and build optimism for the breakthrough technology that worked like an instruction manual to fight not only COVID but potentially any number of diseases.

But today, the center isn't focused on the technology, called mRNA, which some experts say could eventually help stop deadly outbreaks of hantavirus and Ebola.

That's because it has fallen out of favor with the administration of President Donald Trump and his health secretary, who is openly skeptical of vaccines. So the center's leaders are refocusing to keep the labs and the scientists going.

The center's pivot now depends on Stefan Kappe, who took over as director in February. He must prove the value of new vaccines — and of his own center — amid federal disinvestment and rising public distrust.

The vaccines were “a miracle; they saved more lives than any other intervention in modern history,” said Kappe, an internationally recognized malaria researcher.

But he lamented that “the current public perception of vaccines is that they are a danger.”

The center has begun relying more heavily on sources of funding outside the federal government and has expanded the roster of vaccines and other research areas to benefit more people, with 90 active grants focused on rising threats such as dengue and perennial [scourges like flu](#).

The money won't go toward researching and developing new mRNA-based vaccines that could tackle not only infectious diseases but also cancer. Efforts nationwide were hobbled after the federal government slashed funding for the technology by \$500 million last year, part of broader cutbacks in government research spending at universities such as the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins.

Dr. William Moss, director of Hopkins' Vaccine Access Center, said vaccine experts like those at the University of Maryland have long played a role in responding to and preventing global outbreaks.

“The U.S. has traditionally been a key player, but you need a financial investment to do that,” he said.

Despite the broader cuts, the center saw its budget increase during the fiscal year ending this month. But unlike in the past, the bulk of the money wasn't from federal sources. About 84% of the \$21.1 million in grants awarded during the last fiscal year came from outside the government.



A colony of Anopheles mosquitos at the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health. Anopheles is the type of mosquito that can carry the parasite that causes malaria; this particular colony is not infected. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

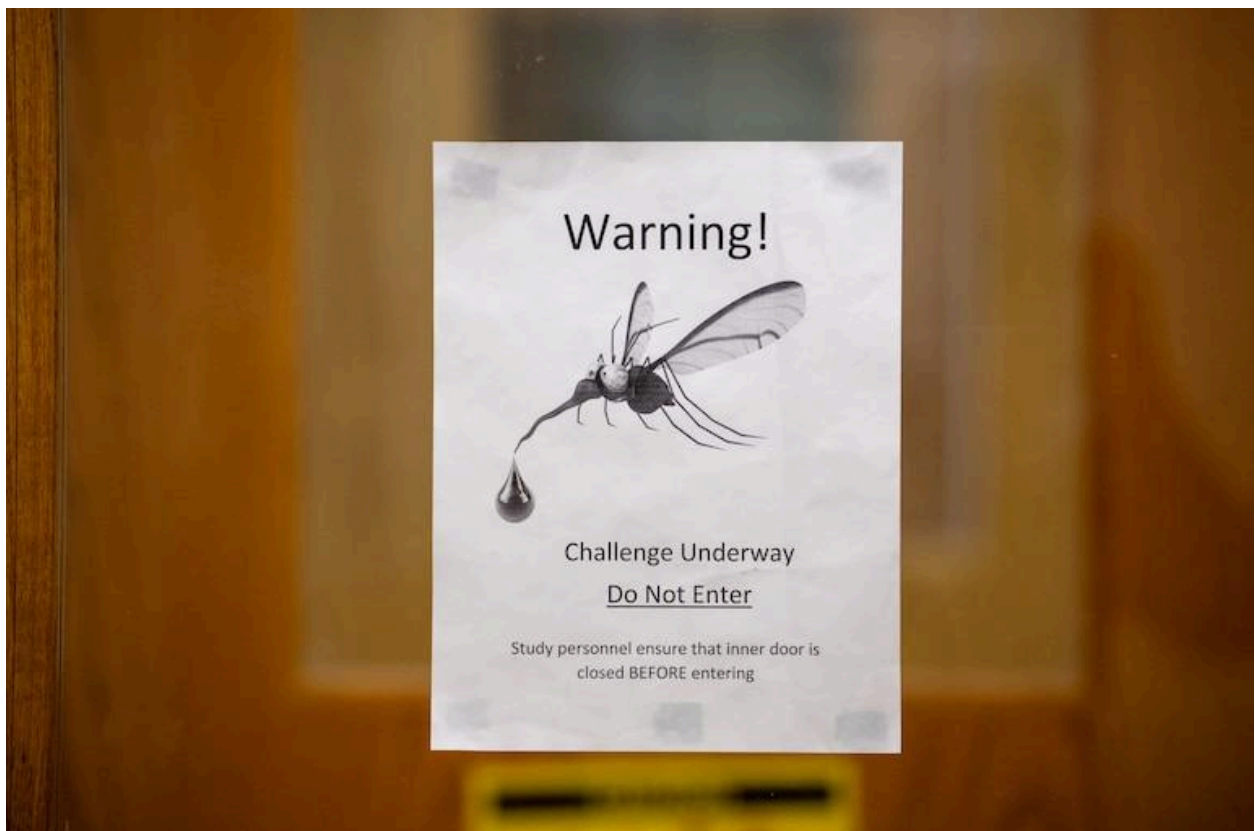
For now, researchers work on the diseases that still have funding or can attract new funding from any source. One researcher, Dr. Kirsten Lyke, who a decade ago helped test a vaccine for a different strain of the Ebola virus, is now helping develop a combination [rabies-Lassa fever vaccine](#) that would simplify protection in remote areas against potentially fatal infections.

The center is also looking into a universal flu vaccine that could eliminate the need for annual shots for different strains. Elsewhere, it's working on dengue, a mosquito-borne disease that is spreading more frequently in the United States.

Kappe also continues work on a more effective vaccine against malaria, which public health experts say remains one of the [most pressing global health problems](#) and is responsible for about half a million deaths annually.

Kappe helped develop the vaccine in his previous positions at the University of Washington in Seattle and at the Center for Global Infectious Disease Research at the Seattle Children's Research Institute.

For the work in Baltimore, the center now breeds its own mosquitoes that can carry malaria. It feeds blood to the insects to infect them and recruits volunteers armed with a trial vaccine to be bitten at least five times.



A warning sign is posted on a room at the university where volunteers are bitten by mosquitoes in a controlled environment to test the efficacy of malaria vaccines. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)