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POLITICS

Skeptics in the Spotlight: Takeaways From RFK Jr.'s Vaccine Panel

Advisory committee airs its rethinking of the full slate of childhood vaccines

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Aaron Siri, a lawyer who has pushed to remove polio and other vaccines from the market, made a presentation to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Quick Summary



- A vaccine-advisory panel, remade by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., ended a recommendation for all newborns to receive a hepatitis B vaccine dose.

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ATLANTA—A [vaccine-advisory panel remade](#) by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. just wrapped up a two-day meeting in Atlanta this week where it made its biggest change yet to the slate of recommended vaccines for U.S. children by [doing away with guidance](#) that all newborns receive a [hepatitis B vaccine dose](#).

Here are three takeaways:

Antivaccine groups get a new platform

Over the course of the meeting, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices heard presentations from several vaccine skeptics. Those included Aaron Siri, a lawyer who has represented Kennedy and antivaccine groups and has petitioned the federal government to remove polio and other vaccines from the market.

Siri's appearance drew criticism from Sen. Bill Cassidy (R., La.), a liver doctor who has [decried the panel's new skepticism](#) of vaccines. "The ACIP is totally discredited," he said. "They are not protecting children." Siri in return challenged the senator to a debate.

Siri and Dr. Robert Malone, the panel's vice chair, said that vaccinologists as well as Kennedy critics Dr. Paul Offit and Dr. Peter Hotez had been invited to address the committee. Offit said he didn't remember being invited but wouldn't have attended. "This group is essentially an antivaccine group that has a political agenda," he said. Hotez said he "declined because ACIP appears to have shifted its mission away from science."

The committee was prepared for the brighter spotlight. It met for the first time inside a broadcast studio at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters "to accommodate increased interest in the committee's work that is righting the wrong in vaccine policy through evidence-based science and transparency," said Kennedy spokesman Andrew Nixon. The professional lighting and setup also improved the quality of the meeting's video clips. Pro-Kennedy accounts pushed out a flurry of the clips on social media, as did several federal agencies.

Clash over childhood vaccine safety

Whether to change vaccine policy for children over safety concerns was a central theme during the meeting.

"I suggest to parents to be very, very suspicious when people tell them that something is safe, especially a vaccine," said panel member and management professor Retsef Levi.

The panel [voted to end](#) a recommendation that all newborns receive a hepatitis B vaccine dose at birth. Some panel members voiced concerns about potential risks of the vaccine, while a minority said those concerns were unfounded. "Thoughtful

inquiry is always commendable, but that inquiry should not be confused with baseless skepticism, which is what I think we're encountering here," said panel member Dr. Cody Meissner, who voted against ending the recommendation.

The subgroup of panel members that recommended the change also said it understood that "the safety concern may be more theoretical than real."

The vote on hepatitis B was pushed from Thursday to Friday after some panel members asked for more time to consider the voting language, which according to panel member Dr. Joseph Hibbeln was revised four times over just a few days.

More vaccine changes are likely

The panel on Friday examined the growth of the childhood vaccine schedule in a discussion that at times grew contentious, as some physicians pushed back on presenters who cast doubt on the need for certain routine immunizations.

Siri, in a presentation focused on the lengthening of the vaccine slate for children, suggested the panel should overhaul the schedule and drop certain childhood vaccine recommendations. He added that the decisions should be made between parents and their doctors.



The membership of the committee was remade by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a skeptic of vaccines. ERIK S. LESSER/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

President Trump joined in the skepticism of the suite of current childhood vaccine recommendations on Friday, signing a presidential memo directing Kennedy to examine vaccine practices in other nations and update the U.S. recommendations, known as the childhood vaccine schedule, as necessary.

"Many parents and scientists have been questioning the efficacy of this 'schedule,' as have I!" he wrote on social media.

Public-health experts voiced concern that the committee was preparing to make more changes to the childhood vaccine schedule, and warned that doing so could lead to outbreaks of preventable diseases that had largely been eradicated from the U.S.

Dr. James Campbell, a pediatrician and vice chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' committee on infectious disease, told reporters in a Friday briefing: "There is no evidence that alternative or delayed schedules provide equal protection."

The AAP and some other organizations representing physicians have declined to update their own recommendations to mirror the federal government's changes to vaccine guidelines under Kennedy. That trend is expected to continue: Campbell said the AAP will continue recommending the hepatitis B birth dose. Some scientists worry that conflicting guidance will stir confusion among parents.

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