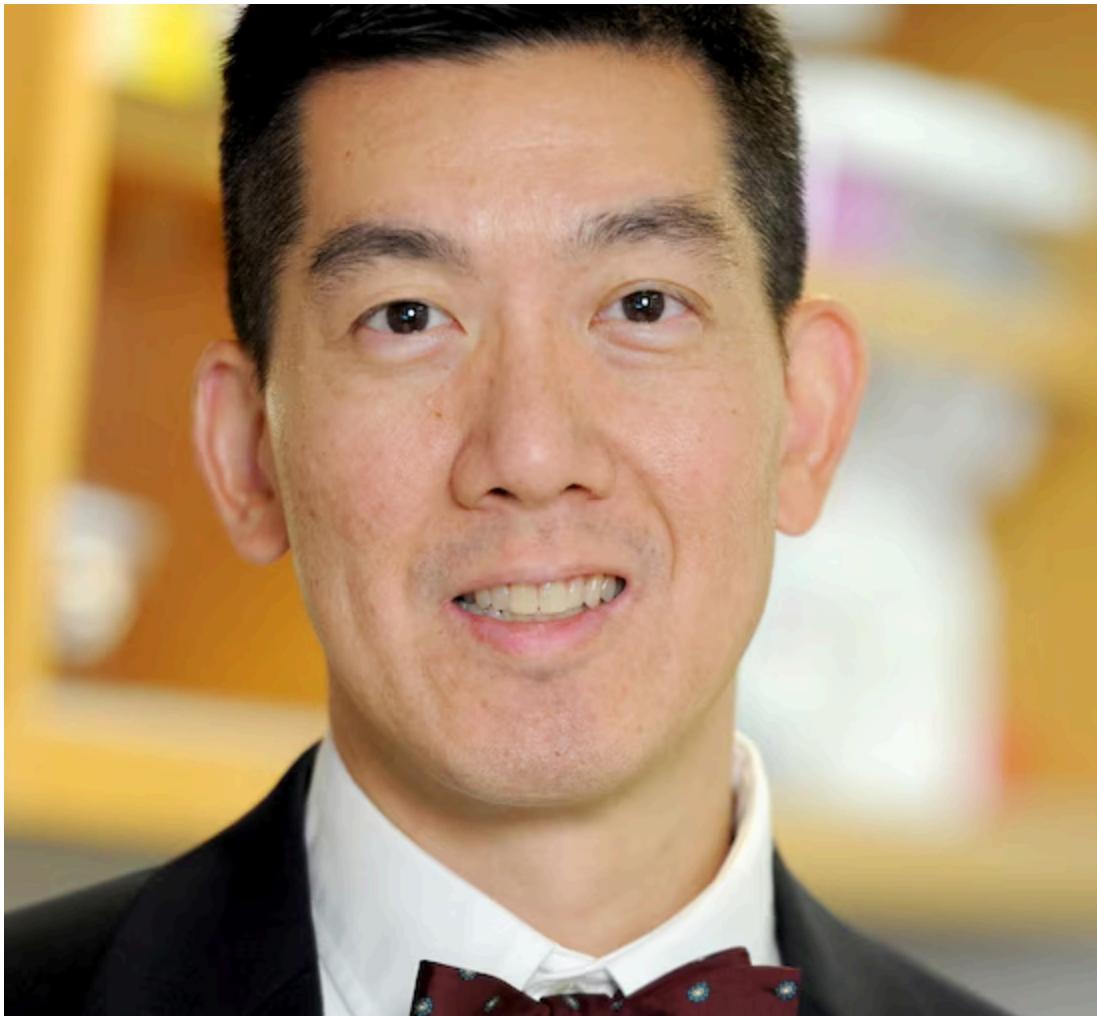


THE BALTIMORE BANNER

The CDC's vaccine advisors were fired. A former insider explains what's at stake.

Meredith Cohn

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Wilbur Chen, M.D., professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health. (University of Maryland School of Medicine)

A national expert on vaccines from Maryland decried the firing Monday of all the members of a prestigious panel on which he used to serve.

Dr. Wilbur Chen, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health, served until last June on the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which guides federal decisions on the rollout of vaccinations and the people who should receive them.

Chen said gutting the deeply experienced group comes just ahead of its next scheduled meeting on June 25, making it unclear how the federal government plans to make its major recommendations on vaccine distributions.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the secretary of the department of Health and Human Services and a longtime vaccine critic, said Monday that he was “retiring” all of the panel members. He said each had conflicts-of-interest from work done on industry-backed research, though Chen said there are rules to address conflicts and Kennedy had taken experts’ disclosures out of context and “completely misinterpreted” them.

Their removal, Kennedy said, was designed to help restore faith in immunizations.

But along with a host of other scientists and medical associations, Chen said the firings could do the opposite. They said it could further undermine public confidence

in vaccines and contribute to a decline in the future use of the medical treatment, including in Maryland.

Chen said it could also end up limiting access to shots that provide protections against preventable diseases. That's because insurance won't cover those that are not recommended, he added.

At its next scheduled meeting, the panel was slated to make recommendations on changes to schedules or rollouts for the next generations of vaccines, including for COVID-19, HPV, influenza, and meningococcal and RSV vaccines for adults and children.

For decades, Chen said, the panel has been a carefully administered system, leaning on experts in vaccines, public health, pediatrics and infectious diseases. They make their recommendations after debating the available data.

The sudden dismantling of the panel comes as public health officials across the country are working to stem a growing measles outbreak.

Chen said he worried about how the Trump administration is making policy changes.

"I am concerned that the Trump government has demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern ... e.g. making policy through X posts or Wall Street Journal op-eds," said Chen in written comments about the ACIP panel. Kennedy first announced he'd fire the panel in the Wall Street Journal.

Chen cited as worrisome how the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed guidance for the COVID vaccines, and no longer recommends the shots for children or pregnant women. He expected more changes to other vaccine recommendations.

It's unclear what will become of the panel.

In the past, Chen said, experts could apply to join the volunteer panel by writing something akin to a "college essay" about why they want to serve and submitting their qualifications along with three letters of recommendation. They were approved both by the CDC director and the health department secretary.

He said the deliberations are also intense, with meetings to discuss vaccine data, the benefits and possibility of harms and the efficacy of the recommended treatments. Panel members made recommendations, which then needed to be approved by the CDC director before they become official policy.

Chen said it's possible that the meeting scheduled for later this month could now be postponed, potentially delaying recommendations about some vaccines. That could jeopardize children's access to some immunizations through a federally funded program, he added.

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If another panel is quickly assembled, Chen said, "they will have little time to fully immerse themselves in the in-depth data review required of them to fully understand the risks and benefits associated with these vaccines."

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