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Covid-19: Florida surgeon general says state will be first not to recommend vaccination for children

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A doctor who appeared in a video tweeted by Donald Trump questioning the need for covid lockdowns and promoting the use of unproven treatments has said, in his new post as Florida surgeon general, that the state will recommend against covid vaccination for healthy children. The move goes against the advice of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"The Florida Department of Health is going to be the first officially to recommend against the covid-19 vaccine for healthy children," Joseph Ladapo said, standing next to Florida's governor Rick de Santis at a panel discussion called "The Curtain Close on Covid Theater." The name refers to an event last week at which the Republican governor chided university students who were wearing masks, saying, "Please take them off. Honestly, it's not doing anything. We've got to stop with this covid theatre."

Ladapo, a Harvard educated physician specialising in internal medicine, first came to public notice in July 2020 when he appeared in a video retweeted by Donald Trump, which was viewed tens of millions of times before being deleted from social media networks as covid misinformation.

In the video, shot on the steps of the US Supreme Court, Ladapo and a small group of doctors criticised lockdowns and extolled the benefits of hydroxychloroquine, then being promoted by Trump and other right wing politicians such as Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro.

The group named themselves America's Frontline Doctors, though few had ever treated covid. The video gained worldwide attention, particularly after it emerged that one of the doctors, Houston physician and pastor Stella Immanuel, had previously claimed that many gynaecological diseases are caused by "astral sex" with "tormenting spirits," that vaccines are designed to make people less religious, and that shape shifting reptilians working for the US government are inserting space alien DNA into common medicines.

America's Frontline Doctors was assembled by leading conservative and Republican organisations such as Tea Party Patriots and the evangelical Council for National Policy (CNP). A CNP conference call leaked by the Center for Media and Democracy showed that Trump campaign staff sought medically qualified voices willing to support the president's call to reopen the economy. Those political staff would go on to write some of the group's statements.

The group's website carried several misleading statements about vaccines, leading to it being banned from most social media. Last year, America's Frontline Doctors sued the US health department in

an attempt to prevent authorisation of any existing covid vaccine in under-16s.¹ Ladapo echoed that vaccine scepticism when he took up the post of Florida surgeon general.

"Vaccines are up to the person, there's nothing special about them compared with any other preventive measure," he said, suggesting exercise and healthy eating as alternatives. "The state should be promoting good health, and vaccination isn't the only path to that. It's been treated almost like a religion. It's just senseless."

Soon after his appointment, Ladapo attracted controversy for refusing to wear a mask while meeting a state senator who had breast cancer.

Announcing Florida's new policy, Ladapo questioned the risks posed by the virus and the benefits of vaccination in children, despite CDC real world studies that show far more frequent illness in unvaccinated children.² The CDC has noted that covid is now among the top 10 killers of US children aged 5-11.³

University of Florida professor of paediatrics Jeffrey Goldhagen told First Coast News that Ladapo's decision was "a very sad day for the state of Florida and a worse day for children."

Doctors' group leader pleads guilty

Like Ladapo, the leader of America's Frontline Doctors, Beverly Hills physician Simone Gold, became a conservative celebrity after the 2020 video. She appeared often on FOX News, met with Mike Pence, and gathered 400 000 Twitter followers. But Gold faces prison after last week pleading guilty to entering and remaining in a restricted building, having been photographed at the storming of the US Congress on 6 January 2021.

Billed as a speaker at a "Rally for Health Freedom" outside Congress that day, Gold instead spoke to the crowd inside Congress through a bullhorn, touting her credentials and warning against vaccine mandates. She was also photographed pressed against the door of the House chamber, behind which stood armed guards, pistols drawn.

Gold will be sentenced in June, under guidelines that recommend up to six months imprisonment, though the judge warned she could face more.

The congressional House subcommittee on the coronavirus is investigating America's Frontline Doctors, which opened a telemedicine service selling hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, and online covid consultations.

In a letter to Gold, committee chairman James Clyburn wrote that the group "is reportedly among the top

purveyors of questionable treatments nationwide and a prominent source of misinformation related to the coronavirus.”

Last month, National Public Radio reported the case of an unvaccinated patient prescribed with ivermectin on the website of America's Frontline Doctors.⁴ The prescribing physician's Alabama medical licence was recently revoked for ordering unnecessary tests, including prostate cancer screening in women, in a fraudulent telemedicine scheme. But she was still able to prescribe with North Carolina and Florida licences.

- 1 Klein NP, Stockwell MS, Demarco M, et al. Effectiveness of covid-19 Pfizer-BioNTech BNT162b2 mRNA vaccination in preventing covid-19—associated emergency department and urgent care encounters and hospitalizations among non-immunocompromised children and adolescents aged 5-17 years—VISION network, 10 states, April 2021-January 2022. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2022;71:352-8. doi: 10.15585/mmwr.mm7109e3 PMID: 35239634
- 2 America's Frontline Doctors etc v US Secretary of Health etc. US District Court for the Northern District of Alabama. Case 2:21-cv-00702-CLM. 19 May 2021. https://assets.website-files.com/606d3a50c62e44338008303d/60a7f7cf74c9c6f4d1133a60_Doc%201%20AFLD%20motion.pdf.
- 3 CDC. Covid-19 vaccines for children and teens. 11 January 2022. www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/children-teens.html
- 4 Brumfiel G. What a bottle of ivermectin reveals about the shadowy world of covid telemedicine. National Public Radio. 9 February 2022. www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/02/09/1079183523/what-a-bottle-of-ivermectin-reveals-about-the-shadowy-world-of-covid-telemedicine.

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