

HEALTH POLICY

Vaccine-Mandate Debate Makes It to Federal Agency Where Fauci Works

The NIH, workplace of Dr. Anthony Fauci, has scheduled a seminar on the ethics of mandates featuring a senior researcher who is pushing back



The National Institutes of Health has scheduled a Dec. 1 live-streamed roundtable session over the ethics of vaccine mandates.

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By [Jenny Strasburg](#)

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The debate over vaccine mandates is surfacing in an unlikely venue: The National Institutes of Health.

The sprawling federal research agency has led government efforts studying and battling Covid-19, including funding the development and testing of vaccines. Anthony Fauci, a top NIH scientist, has been a public face of the Biden administration's case for wider vaccine mandates, including a federal one affecting the NIH's own staff.

But just like at workplaces across the country, vaccine mandates are sparking controversy at the NIH. The agency's main bioethics department has scheduled a Dec. 1 live-streamed roundtable session over the ethics of mandates. The seminar is one of four agencywide

ethics debates this year, accessible to all of the NIH's nearly 20,000 staff, as well as patients and the public, organizers say. It was set up after a senior infectious-disease researcher at the institute pushed back against broadening discussion of mandates this summer and requested an agency ethics review.

“There’s a lot of debate within the NIH about whether [a vaccine mandate] is appropriate,” said David Wendler, the senior NIH bioethicist who is in charge of planning the session. “It’s an important, hot topic.”

A federal appeals court on Saturday temporarily blocked Biden administration rules issued last week by the U.S. Labor Department requiring many private employers to ensure workers are vaccinated or tested weekly for Covid-19. The Labor Department’s top legal adviser said the administration was confident in its authority to issue the mandate and prepared to defend the rules.

In the NIH-scheduled roundtable next month, Matthew Memoli, who runs a clinical studies unit within the NIH’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, will make the case against mandates. Dr. Memoli, 48 years old, opposes mandatory Covid-19 vaccination with currently available shots, and he has declined to be vaccinated.



Dr. Matthew Memoli in 2014; Dr. Memoli has said he supports Covid-19 vaccination in high-risk populations including the elderly and obese.

PHOTO: CHARLES DHARAPAK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I think the way we are using the vaccines is wrong,” he said. In a July 30 email to Dr. Fauci and two of his lieutenants, Dr. Memoli called mandated vaccination “extraordinarily problematic.” He says one of Dr. Fauci’s colleagues thanked him for his email. Dr. Fauci and a NIAID spokeswoman declined to comment.

Dr. Memoli said he supports Covid-19 vaccination in high-risk populations including the elderly and obese. But he argues that with existing vaccines, blanket vaccination of people at low risk of severe illness could hamper the development of more-robust immunity gained across a population from infection.

Epidemiologists and public-health experts overwhelmingly support widespread vaccinations as the best, most predictable way to save lives, build immunity and ultimately defeat the virus. In their view, holdouts like Dr. Memoli—doctors and other healthcare workers who potentially hold sway over others—damage efforts to prevent deaths and severe illness.

A body of research suggests vaccines provide stronger protection against coronavirus than previous infection. A study released last month by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found Covid-19 was over five times more common among hospitalized people who were unvaccinated and had a previous infection, compared with those who were fully vaccinated and hadn't had Covid-19 before.

Timothy Schacker, vice dean for research and infectious-disease physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School, said relying on Covid-19 infections over tried-and-tested vaccines would be dangerous and irresponsible. “That’s a terrible idea if we have a vaccine that prevents serious disease,” he said.

Dr. Memoli’s views, and his status as an unvaccinated doctor, make him an outlier inside and outside the NIH. More than 88% of the NIH’s federal employees were fully vaccinated at the end of October, according to the agency. The rest will need to prove they are vaccinated, or have sought an exemption, before a federal deadline of Nov. 22.

Dr. Memoli has sought an exemption from the NIH mandate and has applied for an exception, on religious grounds, from requirements imposed by health authorities in Washington, D.C., where he is licensed to practice medicine. He says he is willing to risk his job and his license for the right not to receive a Covid-19 shot.

Christine Grady, head of the NIH’s Clinical Center bioethics department, signed off on the Dec. 1 seminar, a session called “Grand Rounds.” She said via email that she believes there is interest in the topic across the agency. “Our hope is that the December Grand Rounds will be relevant to the debates that are going on around the country regarding vaccine mandates,” an agency spokeswoman said on her behalf.

Dr. Grady is married to Dr. Fauci, who has advocated strict mandates to propel vaccination drives. Dr. Wendler, who reports to Dr. Grady, said the bioethics department doesn't set out to influence government policy. "We're a consultation service and sort of an academic department," he said. "We're not policy people."

Dr. Memoli, a 16-year NIH veteran, was selected this month for a 2021 NIH director's award, a top recognition from the head of the agency, for his supervision of a national study into undiagnosed Covid-19 cases early in the pandemic.

Dr. Memoli said his children have all their childhood vaccinations. "I do vaccine trials. I, in fact, help create vaccines," he said. "Part of my career is to share my expert opinions, right or wrong....I mean, if they all end up saying I'm wrong, that's fine. I want to have the discussion."

Covid-19 Vaccines

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