

Lucrative lies

EDITORIAL

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Vaccine refusal has become big business. There are fewer key players than we might think, and they are making good money.



Photo: Sturlason

Vaccinated children are more than four times as likely to develop ADHD and autism as unvaccinated children. The website of the US organisation Children's Health Defense is rife with false claims like this [\(1\)](#). Here, you can buy baby clothes printed with slogans such as 'Unvaxxed Unafraid' and 'No Vax. No Problem', as well as The Measles Book, which reveals '35 secrets that the media, US government and Big Pharma don't want you to know about vaccines' [\(1\)](#). You can also watch alarming, professionally produced films about the horrors of vaccination and donate money to the organisation. In mid-May 2025, the goal was to raise USD 1 million in donations by the end of the month [\(1\)](#).

One of the founders and a longtime former CEO of Children's Health Defense is the current US Secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F Kennedy Jr [\(1\)](#). The organisation is known as one of the main sources of misinformation on vaccines [\(2\)](#). By 2021, its website had already attracted 4.7 million visitors each month [\(2\)](#), and in 2022 alone, the organisation received USD 23.5 million (approximately NOK 240 million) in donations and other contributions [\(3\)](#). Kennedy himself received a salary of USD 510,000 (more than NOK 5 million) in 2022 as the organisation's CEO [\(3\)](#).

Several other figures are also making good money by promoting vaccine refusal. Del Bigtree, the film producer who was Communications Director for Kennedy's 2023 presidential campaign, received nearly NOK 3 million in 2022 as CEO of the anti-vaccination group Informed Consent Action Network [\(3\)](#).

And Simone Gold, a doctor imprisoned for her role in the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, received nearly NOK 6 million in 2022 from the advocacy group America's Frontline Doctors, which also spreads false information about COVID-19 vaccines [\(3\)](#).

«The financial muscle of the leading players in this lucrative market allows them to rapidly spread their message far and wide»

Vaccine refusal has become big business in the United States, with substantial financial support channelled through some of the country's largest charities [\(4\)](#). The financial muscle of the leading players in this lucrative market allows them to rapidly spread their message far and wide. This keeps the money flowing while also creating the impression that there are more actors involved than there actually are. For example, a study published in 2020 showed that more than half of all anti-vaccine ads on Facebook were funded by just two sources, one of which was Children's Health Defense [\(5\)](#). Similarly, an analysis found that up to 73 % of all anti-vaccine content on Facebook over a two-month period in 2021 was from just 12 different sources, including Robert F Kennedy Jr [\(6\)](#).

«It is easy to forget that those who fish in the murky waters of public fear and mistrust can also have strong financial interests»

The prevalence of vaccine refusal is often explained by factors such as fear of side effects, personal beliefs, general distrust of authorities, conspiracy theories and a lack of scientific understanding [\(7\)](#). It is easy to forget that those who fish in the murky waters of public fear and mistrust can also have strong financial interests. The phenomenon is nothing new. Andrew Wakefield, the discredited British doctor who in 1998 published the fraudulent study linking MMR vaccines with autism, also had financial motives. He had secretly applied for a patent on his own supposedly safer vaccine while also receiving money from law firms seeking to sue vaccine manufacturers [\(8, 9\)](#). Wakefield remains active today, most notably as the producer of a film (tellingly in collaboration with Robert F Kennedy Jr and Children's Health Defense) that alleges the World Health Organization is creating vaccines that cause infertility in women as part of a population control agenda [\(10\)](#).

The United States now has vocal vaccine deniers in key government roles. Meanwhile, restoring public trust in science and impartial information has become increasingly urgent. A modelling study has shown that measles could become endemic if the current low vaccination coverage is not improved [\(11\)](#). It is easy to think that this would never happen in Norway, but a recent survey measuring trust in researchers among citizens of 68 countries ranked the United States 19th, while Norway came in at a modest 39 – with trust in researchers below the global average [\(12\)](#). We too must therefore be vigilant against misinformation and conspiracy theories about vaccines. One step in the right direction is to acknowledge that those whipping up support for vaccine refusal are often more motivated by money than ideology.

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