

Correspondence Between Francis Collins and Michael Zimmerman

Sunday, 30 August 2020

Francis Collins to Michael Zimmerman

Dear Michael,

I am deeply troubled to read your essay. For someone with your training in science to adopt this view gives me true heartache about the future of our nation. As NIH Director deeply engaged in the vaccine development program, I have a front row seat to the science that is being pursued -- in fact, it is a consuming passion that currently leads to 100-hour weeks. And it's actually going really well. I am cautiously optimistic that by the end of 2020 we will have at least one vaccine that is safe and effective -- by rigorous standards that I think you would strongly endorse. But if you, and millions of others, have already closed your mind to the possibility that this might succeed, we will be dooming tens of thousands more to die in 2021 and beyond.

I am troubled that your confidence has been shaken in FDA and CDC. But the vaccine approval process will have to be transparent for all to see -- that has already been guaranteed. Shouldn't you reserve judgment until you see the data? Isn't that what you as a scientist are called to? Why would you prejudge the outcome now? Are you allowing your own scientific judgment to be overcome by the current political tumult, and granting a victory to the forces of irrationality?

Please reconsider. Righteous indignation is one of my favorite emotions too, but sometimes it needs to be scrutinized. Many people depend on you and the Clergy Letter Project to bring a faithful blend of scientific reason and God's love to a hurting world. Does this stance fit with that? Prayerfully consider what God would expect of you at a time like this. Lives are at stake.

Forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but this really matters.

With respect and admiration for all the good things you and the Clergy Letter Project have done,

Francis

Sunday, 30 August 2020

Michael Zimmerman to Francis Collins

Dear Francis,

Thank you for writing such a clear and forceful response to my essay. I'm truly honored that you would take the time to do so. I respect you and all you have accomplished so very much so your words carry added weight.

There is much that we agree on. I have absolutely no doubt that the numerous scientists working on a vaccine are doing so in a manner that is incredibly impressive. I question neither their dedication nor their competence. Similarly, I am heartened by your projection that you are "cautiously optimistic that by the end of 2020" a safe and effective vaccine might be available. I hope with all my heart you are correct.

Where we disagree, however, is in the critical statement that you made in your next paragraph. You wrote that "the vaccine approval process will have to be transparent for all to see -- that has already been guaranteed." If only that were to come to pass. I don't mistrust you, those who report to you and all of the bench scientists who are working so hard. I do mistrust the current administration and those in power at the FDA and the CDC who have demonstrated that they are unwilling to pay attention to the data, to fully share data informing their decisions, and to tell the truth. I mistrust the president and those who report directly to him to do what's in the best interest of the American people - indeed, the people of the world.

While I don't presume to know what's in the heart of Stephen Hahn and Robert Redfield, and unlike you I don't know these men personally, I have to judge them on their actions. To my eye, supported by the views of individuals who have previously held the positions they are currently in, they have been unable to withstand the withering political pressure they have encountered from the president. They have misspoken and misled. They have taken actions that put people's lives at risk. They have taken actions that make it all but impossible to move forward with good science. (Being able to conduct appropriate studies on the efficacy of convalescent plasma at this point is just one example.) If the president were to say "approve this vaccine," I simply cannot trust them to do anything other than to say "yes, sir." And, despite any guarantees, I don't see any data being released fully and impartially to support that decision.

As you know, as you wrote to me, I am not anti-science and I am certainly a very strong proponent of vaccination and a very strong supporter of our medical establishment, an establishment that until now has had the respect of all professionals in the world. That respect, not of the rank and file, but of the leadership, has now been undone by the political process in which it has participated.

I fear that premature approval of a vaccine, one that might not work as intended, one that hasn't been fully vetted, will do more harm to individuals and to society, than waiting for the appropriate moment for granting approval with the appropriate data.

As I said above, I am encouraged that you believe an effective vaccine might be available by the end of the year. If your belief is actually possible, I hope your prediction is off by a month and that approval doesn't occur until after 20 January 2021 with a new administration in place. If a new set of individuals were to examine the data and grant approval, I'd happily be the first in

line. When, on a daily basis, however, our current president keeps talking about a possible vaccine prior to the election, I continue to lose faith. While I can see such approval occurring (such a thing has happened in Russia after all), it will not, in my opinion, be based on science and the good work of all of those who are working so very hard to benefit all of us.

Unfortunately, I am not an outlier in holding the position I hold - and that speaks to the incredible damage that has been done to the reputation of our once great institutions. As I quoted in my essay, a former FDA spokesperson said, "The damage that has been done will take at least 10 years to repair." I've come to my conclusion slowly and reluctantly. I wish I could believe something other than what I believe. I fear, however, that waiting to voice concern until after a premature approval has been granted will be too late. It will be impossible to reverse the damage that will have been done.

Let me reiterate the respect I have for you. That respect has led me to reconsider my position and to carefully think through my position. Despite your words, I can't move beyond my belief that in the current environment, at the highest ranks of government, politics is playing a larger role than is science. I wish it were otherwise.

Because your words are so thoughtful and impassioned, I want to ask a large favor of you, one that I will fully understand if you refuse. May I share your thoughts with members of The Clergy Letter Project in our next newsletter? I would be delighted to present them as a counterpoint to what I have already written and thus to better enable members to make a fully informed decision about what they want to believe. We are a better people when we are better informed and when we are able to disagree with one another civilly after weighing alternative positions. Your note is a wonderful example of how we might move forward in these troubled times.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me, for considering my request to share your words more broadly, for your service to our country, to the world, and to your faith, and for your past and future support for The Clergy Letter Project.

Michael

Additional Resources

Original Essay (28 August 2020) Written by Michael Zimmerman and entitled "[Why I'll Not be Taking a Covid-19 Vaccine – and I'm a Scientist](#)"

Washington Post (29 August 2020) article entitled "[Inside Trump's pressure campaign on federal scientists over a covid-19 treatment](#)" This piece discusses, among other things, how "NIH

Director Francis Collins was skeptical and immediately expressed his opposition to the emergency authorization” of convalescent plasma.

Financial Times (30 August 2020) article entitled “[FDA head says he is willing to fast-track Covid-19 vaccine](#)” The opening paragraph of this piece explains Stephen Hahn’s latest position: “The head of the US Food and Drug Administration has said he is willing to bypass the normal approval process to authorise a Covid-19 vaccine as soon as possible — but has insisted he will not do so to please President Donald Trump.”

New York Times (2 August 2020) article entitled “[Scientists Worry About Political Influence Over Coronavirus Vaccine Project](#)” The headline says it all!