

July 12, 2021

Today I became the 25<sup>th</sup> of 64 state and territorial immunization program directors to leave their position during this pandemic. That's nearly 40% of us. And along with our resignations or retirements or, as in my case, push from office, goes the institutional knowledge and leadership of our respective COVID-19 vaccine responses. I will not sit quietly by while our public health infrastructure is eroded in the midst of a pandemic.

We are a group of dedicated public health professionals who have worked endless hours to make COVID-19 vaccines, the ONE tool we have to effectively end the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic, available to every person in our jurisdictions. Along the way we have been disparaged, demeaned, accused, and sometimes vilified by a public who chooses not to believe in science, and elected and appointed officials who have put their own self-interest above the people they were chosen to represent and protect.

On May 6, 2021, in advance of the approval of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for 12-15 year olds and in response to multiple questions I had received regarding the rules around vaccinating minors, I reached out to Tennessee Department of Health's general counsel to request a statement regarding Tennessee's Mature Minor Doctrine that resulted from a Tennessee Supreme Court Ruling in *Cardwell v Bechtol* in 1987. In response, I received a document attached to an email stating, "Sure—Attached is the new summary of the doctrine that has just recently been posted to the website and is blessed by the Governor's office on the subject. This is forward facing so feel free to distribute to anyone." On May 10, 2021, I copied and pasted the language provided to me into a memo that was distributed only to providers who were administering COVID-19 vaccines. A recipient of that memo was upset that, according to Tennessee Supreme Court case law, minors ages 14-17 years are able to receive medical care in Tennessee without parental consent and posted the memo to social media. Within days, legislators were contacting TDH asking questions about the memo with some interpreting it as an attempt to undermine parental authority. Let me be clear: this was an informational memo containing language approved by the TDH Office of General Counsel which was sent to medical providers by the medical director of the state's immunization program regarding the guardrails set 34 years ago by the Tennessee Supreme Court around providing care to minors.

What has occurred in the time between the release of this memo and today, when I was terminated from my position as medical director of the vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization program at the Tennessee Department of Health, can only be described as bizarre. On May 19<sup>th</sup> TDH was asked to appear before the Government Operations Committee due to the concern that the memo was "a bit of a prodding or encouraging to vaccinate children without parental consent". This was followed by a series of requests from members of the Committee for data around the impact of COVID-19 on children and a request to appear before the Committee again on June 16. It was at that June 16<sup>th</sup> meeting that the Department was accused of "targeting" youth through Facebook messaging and its actions were described as "reprehensible" by one Committee member. That member went on to call for the "dissolving and reconstitution" of the Department of Health in the midst of a pandemic where one out of every 542 Tennesseans has died from COVID-19 on their watch and less than 38% of Tennesseans have been vaccinated. It is the mission of the Tennessee Department of Health to "protect, promote and improve the health and prosperity of the people of Tennessee" and protecting them against the deadliest infectious disease event in more than 100 years IS our job. It's the most important job we've

had in recent history. Specifically, it was MY job to provide evidence-based education and vaccine access so that Tennesseans could protect themselves against COVID-19. I have now been terminated for doing exactly that. Each of us should be waking up every morning with one question on our minds: “What can I do to protect the people of Tennessee against COVID-19?”. Instead, our leaders are putting barriers in place to ensure the people of Tennessee remain at-risk, even with the delta variant bearing down upon us.

What’s more is that the leadership of the Tennessee Department of Health has reacted to the sabre rattling from the Government Operations Committee by halting ALL vaccination outreach for children. Not just COVID-19 vaccine outreach for teens, but ALL communications around vaccines of any kind. No back-to-school messaging to the more than 30,000 parents who did not get their children measles vaccines last year due to the pandemic. No messaging around human papilloma virus vaccine to the residents of the state with one of the highest HPV cancer rates in the country. No observation of National Immunization Awareness Month in August. No reminders to the parents of teens who are late in receiving their second COVID-19 vaccine. THIS is a failure of public health to protect the people of Tennessee and THAT is what is “reprehensible”. When the people elected and appointed to lead this state put their political gains ahead of the public good, they have betrayed the people who have trusted them with their lives.

I was told that I should have been more “politically aware” and that I “poked the bear” when I sent a memo to medical providers clarifying a 34 year old Tennessee Supreme Court ruling. I am not a political operative, I am a physician who was, until today, charged with protecting the people of Tennessee, including its children, against preventable diseases like COVID-19. I have been terminated for doing my job because some of our politicians have bought into the anti-vaccine misinformation campaign rather than taking the time to speak with the medical experts. They believe what they choose to believe rather than what is factual and evidence-based. And it is the people of Tennessee who will suffer the consequences of the actions of the very people they put into power. The public health professionals at the Tennessee Department of Health have worked themselves to exhaustion to protect Tennesseans from this virus. They are heroes. They have prevented suffering and saved countless lives. They are to be honored and commended, not cursed and vilified. And the “leaders” of this state who have put their heads in the sand and denied the existence of COVID-19 or who thought they knew better than the scientists who have spent their lives working to prevent disease... who have ignored the dead and dying surrounding them—even when their own colleagues have fought for their lives—they are what is “reprehensible”. I am ashamed of them. I am afraid for my state. I am angry for the amazing people of the Tennessee Department of Health who have been mistreated by an uneducated public and leaders who have only their own interests in mind. And I am deeply saddened for the people of Tennessee, who will continue to become sick and die from this vaccine-preventable disease because they choose to listen to the nonsense spread by ignorant people. At this point, you are going to get vaccinated or you are going to get sick. Yes, not getting the vaccine is a personal choice. It’s true that you are likely to survive COVID-19. It’s the 1 out of every 542 people surrounding you that will suffer the consequences of an unfortunate decision to remain vulnerable to this horrible disease.

May God bless the people of Tennessee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'The Firm' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Michelle D. Fiscus, MD FAAP