

## Viewpoint: ‘I’m not anti vaccine, I’m pro-vaccine safety’ — Debunking Robert F. Kennedy’s lies about vaccine beliefs

**C** NN host Kasie Hunt interviewed antivax presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Although she did better than most journalists confronting him for his past antivax statements in that she played a clip of one of his antivax statements, she clearly hadn’t anticipated his response, which should have been very predictable given that he’s been using it for at least 15 years. I guess it’s time for another primer.

One of the oldest antivax deflections in response to accusations of being antivaccine is a rejoinder of the form “I’m not antivaccine; I’m pro-safe vaccine” or “I’m not antivax; I’m a vaccine safety advocate.” Whatever the exact variation of this particular trope employed by any given antivaxer when asked if they’re “antivaccine,” the idea is clearly to recast all the negative things that the antivaxer had been saying about vaccines as not being evidence of a general opposition to vaccines but rather as evidence that they are “vaccine safety” advocates who are just pointing out ways in which vaccines are supposedly insufficiently “safe.” Of course, the antivax definition of “vaccine safety” implied by their attacks on vaccines always involves exaggeration, misrepresenting scientific data, pseudoscience, attributing adverse events to vaccines that they do not actually cause, and the Nirvana fallacy; *i.e.*, a standard for safety that is unreasonable and impossible to achieve in the real world. I’ve written about this particular tactic more times than I can remember going back nearly two decades, but it appears that I need to address it again in the context of an interview conducted earlier this month CNN by Kasie Hunt with antivax activist turned independent Presidential candidate [RFK Jr.](#) (a.k.a. [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#)).

The reason that I feel compelled to write about this particular antivax trope yet again is because Hunt came so very, very, **very** close to handling RFK Jr.’s dissembling perfectly. She fell a bit short, however, because she apparently only anticipated one move ahead, rather than anticipating two or more moves ahead. Don’t get me wrong. As a journalist, she acquitted herself far better than 99% of journalists do when interviewing RFK Jr. However, she fell a bit short by apparently not being prepared for his very predictable rejoinder to being confronted with irrefutable evidence of his past antivax statements. I say “very predictable” because RFK Jr. has been using variations of this response going back to at least 2005.

Let’s take a look at what I mean, and in doing so I’ll show where Hunt did very well, given that the interview involved more than just RFK Jr.’s dissembling about being pro-“vaccine safety,” and where she could have done better. I also do this hopefully as a resource for those who might consider interviewing RFK Jr. in the future. Think of it this way. You can’t win a game of chess by only thinking one move ahead; that is, unless your opponent is a beginner or not very good. Make no mistake. RFK Jr. is *not* a beginner when it comes to spreading his antivaccine message, and he is actually very, very good at it, having had close to two decades of experience.

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## **“Not antivaccine, pro-vaccine safety”?**

I saw the clip that prodded me to write this post on X, or, as I prefer to call it, the platform formerly known as Twitter:

screenshot pm

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**Kasie Hunt**

@kasie

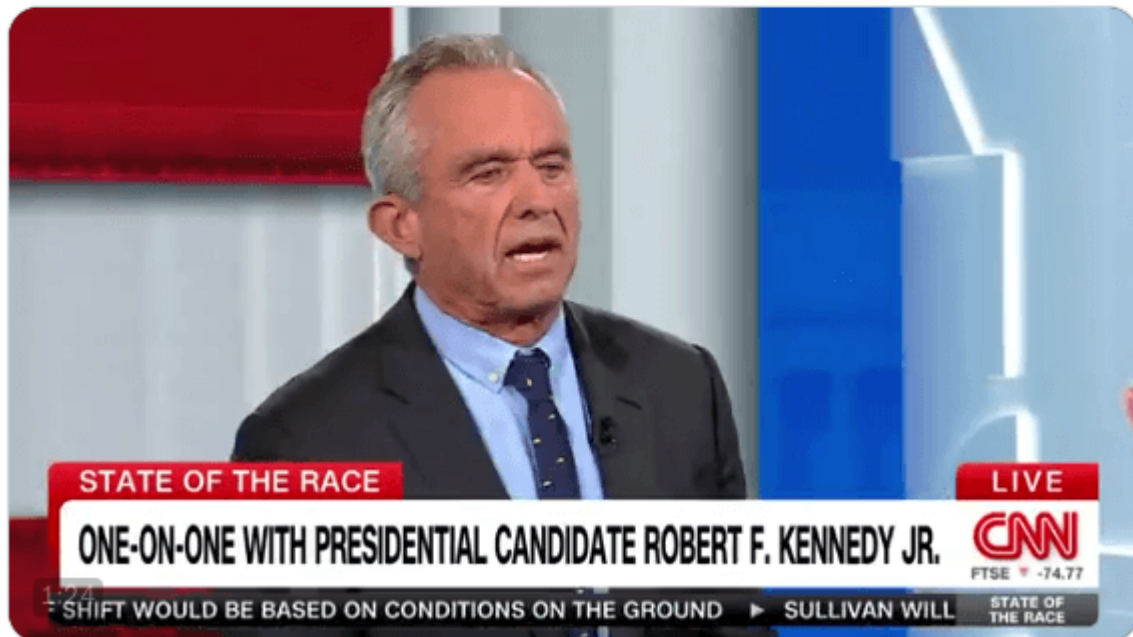


He said he is not anti-vaccine, but he told me he doesn't think any should be mandated for schoolchildren.

KENNEDY: "No. I would be against mandates at all."

KASIE: "For any vaccines for children?"

KENNEDY: "For any vaccine."



2:14 PM · Dec 15, 2023 · 407.4K Views

The entire interview can be found [here](#) and:



**Kasie Hunt**  
@kasie

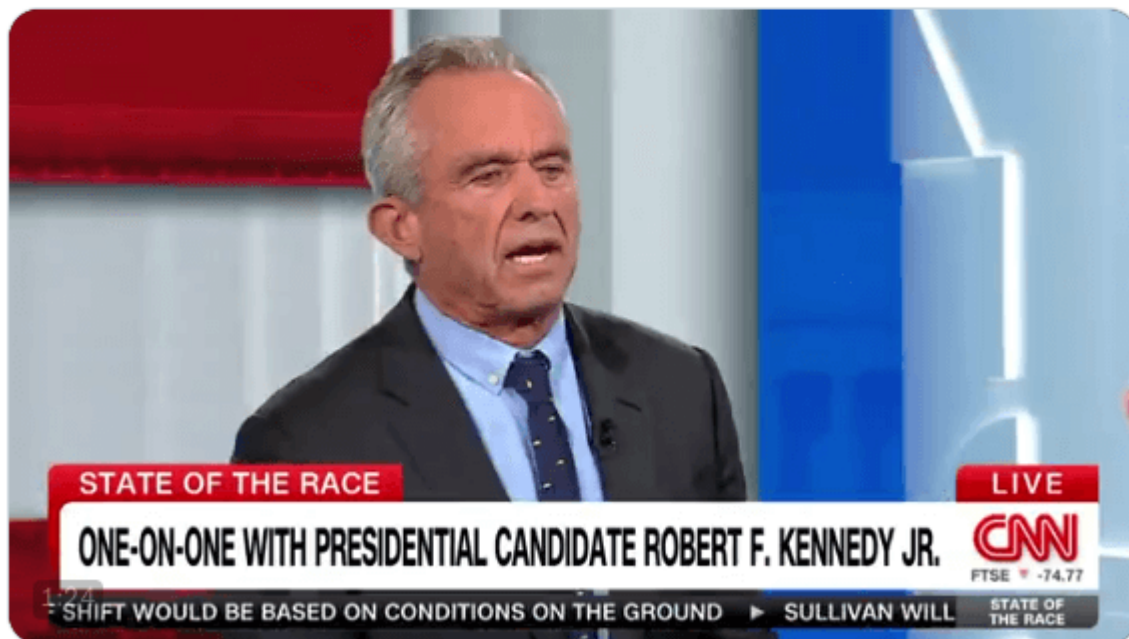


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Note that I wrote about that last conspiracy theory about Ashkenazi Jews supposedly being immune to COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes the disease, being an [“ethnically targeted bioweapon.”](#) As for being “not antivaccine,” I like to point out how [since at least 2014](#) RFK Jr. has risibly been characterizing himself as “fiercely pro-vaccine,” even as he spews obvious antivaccine misinformation. However, let’s take a [look at what RFK Jr. said](#) in the clip played after he had denied being “antivaccine”:

**FRIDMAN:** You’ve talked about that the media slanders you by calling you an antivaxxer. And you’ve said that you’re not anti-vaccine, you’re pro-safe vaccine. Difficult question: Can you

name any vaccines that you think are good?

**KENNEDY:** I think some of the live virus vaccines are probably averting more problems than they're causing. There's no vaccine that is, you know, safe and effective.

Although I'm generally not a fan, I nonetheless give Lex Fridman some credit for asking this question, but he, too, probably wasn't adequately prepared for a lawyer as lawyerly slippery as RFK Jr. has long been. Personally, I would have followed up by asking specifically **which** live virus vaccines that RFK Jr. thought were "probably averting more problems than they're causing," which would likely have provoked more dissembling given that RFK Jr. never wants to be caught saying anything good about vaccines except as a prelude to trashing them, and would have asked him how saying that there is "no vaccine" that is safe and effective is not antivaccine, which is what Hunt, to her credit, did:

"So, you did say it. Do you still believe it?" Hunt asked again.

"Here's what I would say," Kennedy responded. "First of all, I'm not anti-vaccine — "

"How is that statement not anti-vaccine?" Hunt interrupted.

"Well, I can say right now there's no medicine for cancer that's safe and effective. It doesn't mean I'm against all medicines."

That bit about cancer medications is a new one—or at least one that I don't recall having heard him say before—and I'll deal with it in a moment. First, I note that it wasn't long before RFK Jr. went back to his old favorites:

I've been fighting 40 years to get mercury out of fish. Nobody calls me anti-fish. What I want are vaccines that are proven safe. And, what I meant, which was a bad use of words, is, none of the vaccines that's currently on the mandated schedule for children, the 72 vaccines, have ever been studied in a pre-licensing safety study. What that means is, we do not know what the risk profile is for those products, and you cannot prove or say with any scientific certainty that those products are causing —

I'll also get to the part about the "72 vaccines" supposedly never having been studied for safety in a moment, because that's a more recent "classic" antivax trope that RFK Jr. has been repeating and that Hunt should have expected. I will also point out that RFK Jr. left out one of his old favorites, which was to compare himself to Ralph Nader and his crusade for automobile safety and ask rhetorically (with a flourish, of course) something along the lines of, "Does that make Ralph Nader 'anti-car'?"

I will also point out that the “I’m not ‘antivaccine,’ I’m pro-safe vaccine” or “pro-vaccine safety” was a favorite antivax rejoinder back in the [heyday of Jenny McCarthy](#) 15 years ago. She would routinely employ some variation of this trope whenever she was asked about charges that *maybe*—just **maybe**—she **might** be “antivaccine,” for example, as she did in this interview in 2010 on [PBS Frontline](#):

We’re not an anti-vaccine movement. We’re pro-safe-vaccine schedule. Until we have that conversation, people are going to think it’s an anti- and pro- side.

And:

I don’t think there is a green vaccine. The purpose in our statement of Green Our Vaccines really is: Let’s take a look at our environment. Let’s take a look at some of these toxic ingredients and pull them out. Let’s take a look at a safer schedule. I mean, our motto was “Too many, too soon” with the Green Our Vaccines march. And like I said, it’s not like I’m looking for a Whole Foods version of a shot. We’re looking for just a smarter and safer one in that title of Green Our Vaccines.

I could go on and on and on with examples of Jenny McCarthy using variations on this theme of donning the mantle of “vaccine safety” as though it were the invisibility cloak in the Harry Potter novels, except that she seemed to think that claiming to be “pro-safe vaccine” rendered her past antivax statements invisible. Before I move on I will, however, quote perhaps her most famous example of this tactic, which comes from [interview published in TIME Magazine](#) in 2009:

I do believe sadly it’s going to take some diseases coming back to realize that we need to change and develop vaccines that are safe. If the vaccine companies are not listening to us, it’s their fucking fault that the diseases are coming back. They’re making a product that’s shit. If you give us a safe vaccine, we’ll use it. It shouldn’t be polio versus autism.

And:

People have the misconception that we want to eliminate vaccines. Please understand that we are not an antivaccine group. We are demanding safe vaccines. We want to reduce the schedule and reduce the toxins. If you ask a parent of an autistic child if they want the measles or the autism, we will stand in line for the fucking measles.

This is, of course, a familiar false dichotomy favored by antivaxxers. It is also a straw man definition of “antivaccine.” However, let’s get back to the common antivax claim to be for “vaccine safety” and not against vaccines. One way I like to respond to such claims is to ask something along the lines of, “If, as you say, vaccines don’t work, are dangerous, and contain lots of horrible toxins, why on earth wouldn’t you be antivaccine? If I were to come to believe all the horrible things you say about vaccines, I would

become antivaccine.” They never seem to have an answer for that one.

Remember how I said that the antivax definition of a “safe” vaccine is deceptive and unrealistic? Notice how McCarthy, even as she was claiming that she was for “safer” vaccines,” was spewing a favorite antivaccine talking point that claims that there are all sorts of horrible “toxins” in vaccines. (There aren’t at the amounts used in actual vaccines.) Back in the day, for example, she used to complain about formaldehyde, which is present in vaccines in tiny amounts left over from the manufacturing process and which is produced in normal metabolism in amounts far greater than what is in any childhood vaccine. In the age of COVID-19, mRNA with pseudouridine, lipid nanoparticles, and tiny amounts of DNA fragments left over from the manufacturing process are the new formaldehyde. What RFK Jr. did in his interview with Kasie Hunt was no different than what Jenny McCarthy was doing in her heyday as the celebrity face of the antivaccine movement.

Coming back to RFK Jr.’s analogy to cancer medications, RFK Jr. was obviously invoking the Nirvana fallacy yet again, in which *any* medication, particularly any vaccine, that is not absolutely 100% safe and 100% effective is, to antivaxxers, dangerous toxin-laden sludge and utterly ineffective and dangerous. Remember, however, that “safety” is always a relative term in this context. In the case of cancer, more risk of complications and side effects is tolerated because cancer is a life-threatening disease. Viewed in that light, there are a number of very effective ant-cancer medications and chemotherapies that, when you balance the benefits of their efficacy versus the risks of their toxicities, come out with a profile sufficiently favorable to merit the shorthand of being “safe and effective,” because when we say “safe and effective” we mean safe and effective relative to the indication for which the drug is being used. Also notice how RFK Jr. equates vaccines with cancer chemotherapy. Lawyer that he is, he knows that most people are aware of the toxicities of chemotherapy and, whenever chemotherapy for cancer is mentioned, probably can’t help but think of cancer patients who have lost their hair and look gaunt and unhealthy, either having seen a family member go through cancer treatment or encountered media depictions of what cancer treatment is like. When RFK Jr. glibly says that there are no “safe and effective” cancer medications but that that doesn’t mean that he’s “against all medicines,” he is engaging in sophistry and a false comparison designed to lead the listener to think of vaccines and chemotherapy as having similar levels of risk.

Vaccines, of course, are designed for an entirely different purpose than a cancer treatment. In general, they are designed to prevent, rather than treat, disease. Given that purpose, they are indeed held to a much higher standard of safety, in which a much lower incidence of side effects and adverse events can be tolerated. It would be completely unreasonable to market a vaccine that has a side effect profile like chemotherapy as a disease preventative, which is why vaccines are held to such high safety standards, the efforts of slick liars like RFK Jr. to portray them otherwise notwithstanding. It’s a warm-up for him then to portray existing vaccines as unsafe and ineffective, including his lie that the “72 vaccines” on the childhood schedule have never been tested for safety.

This brings us back to the rest of the exchange, in which Hunt interrupted RFK Jr. as he was claiming that we can’t “say with any scientific certainty that those products are causing —” in order to [ask](#):

“So, you’re saying that you still believe that no vaccines are safe and effective?”

“No! What I’m saying is, none of the 72 vaccines has ever been tested in a safety study.”

Here we go again, and I’ll get to this in a moment, after noting that this statement lead Hunt to ask:

So let me ask you, if you think it’s wise for people to take these vaccines, because you had this to say on a different podcast about whether people with young babies should be getting them shots.

Which led to an image of RFK Jr. over a clip of him saying:

[www respectfulinsolence](http://www.respectfulinsolence)

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I love how RFK Jr. claims that he’s never told parents not to vaccinate, even after having said this he think that audio and video disappear? The Internet is forever.



This serves as well as anything as a good segue to RFK Jr.'s claim about "72 vaccines" in the childhood schedule that have never been tested for safety.

## **72 vials of vaccines on the wall, take one down, give it to kids...**

After the audio clip of RFK Jr. saying that he encouraged parents not to vaccinated and expressing the hope that, if enough people tell parents not to vaccinate their children, they'll listen, RFK Jr. pivoted to:

But what I say again is I had three vaccines when I was a kid and I was fully compliant. My kids got 72.

The whole "72 vaccines" thing is another old and favorite antivax trope, in which they add up every dose of a vaccine that children get, including the yearly flu vaccine and counting each antigen in multivalent vaccines (ones with more than one antigen, like DTaP and MMR) as a whole vaccine, the idea being to come up with a number as large as they possibly can in order to frighten parents. Also, RFK Jr. was [born in 1954](#). In the early 1950s, there were [four vaccines available](#): diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and smallpox. (To this the Jonas Salk's polio vaccine was added in 1955.) Because three of these vaccines were combined into a single shot (DTP), children received five shots by the time they were 2 years old and not more than one shot at a single visit. I rather suspect that RFK Jr.'s telling is a bit off. Even so, note that his assumption is that more vaccines are inherently bad and that times were better when children only received a handful of vaccines back when he was a child. I'd have been tempted to ask RFK Jr. which three vaccines he got, which Hunt did, later, asking "What were your three vaccines?" (Again, kudos for that, although it would have been better to ask it immediately, rather than letting him get started on a rant not unlike the one Bluto did when he asked near the end of Animal House whether it was "over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor.")

It was a question that RFK Jr. dodged:

Let me let me finish this. And the there was a gold rush and a vaccine schedule, including a lot of vaccines that aren't not for diseases that are not even casually contagious.

To which Hunt interjected, reasonably enough, "Name one," leading RFK Jr.'s antivax rant to continue:

Hepatitis hepatitis B.

Hunt responded, "So you don't think hepatitis B vaccine is progress?"

Predictably, he doesn't:

I don't think that hepatitis B, I don't think the current, I think the current science suggest that

the current hepatitis B vaccines are causing more problems than they're solving and listen, why would you\_

To which Hunt interjected:

I'm not in a position to argue with you. I would do science, but I'm glad you're on the record as saying that.

From my perspective, that's one area of weakness that she showed, which allowed RFK Jr. to continue his rant, full of the usual antivax talking points about the birth dose of the hepatitis B vaccine. I'm just going to say that there are [excellent scientific, medical, and epidemiological reasons](#) to give a dose of hepatitis B vaccine at birth, RFK Jr.'s rants about giving the vaccine to infants when the disease can only be caught "through sexual interactions or using a needle." When Hunt says that she "wouldn't object to it, RFK Jr. then goes off on a quack rant:

But why give it to a whole generation? You know, good health comes from building a strong immune system. And we had we never had hepatitis B epidemics when I was a kid. We never had rotavirus epidemics. A lot of these these products were added to this schedule because they enriched the companies. And this is automatic booking, an automatic windfall, a company now being they're now allowed to mandate their product with no legal liability.

Never had rotavirus epidemics? Let's just [quote the CDC here](#):

In the prevaccine era, an estimated 2.7 million rotavirus infections occurred every year in the United States and 95% of children experienced at least one rotavirus infection by age 5 years. Rotavirus infection was responsible for 410,000 physician visits, more than 200,000 emergency department visits, 55,000 to 70,000 hospitalizations, and 20 to 60 deaths annually in children younger than age 5 years. Rotavirus accounted for 30% to 50% of all hospitalizations for gastroenteritis among children younger than age 5 years; the incidence of clinical illness was highest among children age 3 to 35 months.

In other words, either RFK Jr.'s memory is selective, or he is lying. Take your pick.

The rest of the rant is nothing more than a standard [longstanding antivax talking point](#) about the Vaccine Court, which was established by the National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986 and is funded through a tax on each dose of vaccine. Moreover, all the NCVIA of 1986 says is that liability claims for injury due to vaccines have to go through the Vaccine Court first. Federal court is still available to parents if the Vaccine Court rules against them. Moreover, unlike most federal courts, parents who bring complaints to the Vaccine Court will have their reasonable legal expenses reimbursed, win or lose, and the Vaccine Court actually bends over backwards to be fair to parents, to the point of sometimes even compensating them for "injuries" that vaccines do not cause, such as when the court initially [ruled to compensate parents](#) who thought that vaccines had caused sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) in their child. RFK Jr. is a

lawyer. He must surely know that what he's peddling is bullshit. (If he doesn't, then he's an incompetent lawyer.)

Also, his kids most definitely did not get "72 vaccines." RFK Jr., which brings me to another deflection trope that RFK Jr. likes to use when asked if he's antivax, namely bragging about how he had all his children vaccinated according to the CDC recommended schedule. To this, I note that his five children were [born in the years 1984 to 2001](#), two in the 1980s, two in the 1990s, and one in 2001, the last of which was four years before RFK Jr. "came out" as an antivaxxer. Now compare RFK Jr.'s claim that his children received "72 vaccines" to the [actual CDC-recommended vaccines during that time period](#). (Seriously, it's not hard to find the [history of the vaccine schedule](#).) From 1980 to 1994, the CDC-recommended vaccine schedule included Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis, Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Polio (OPV), and Hib. By 2000, the schedule included Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis, Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Polio (IPV), Hib, Hepatitis B, Varicella, and Hepatitis A, to which in 2005 the CDC added seasonal influenza vaccines and the pneumococcal vaccine. Note that measles, mumps, and rubella vaccines were administered as the combination vaccine MMR and that before the 1990s the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccines were administered as the DTP, which later became the DTaP, which contained the same three vaccines, except that the whole cell pertussis vaccine had been replaced with acellular pertussis vaccine. Let's just put it this way: There's no way any of RFK Jr.'s children, not even the one born in 2001, got "72 vaccines," despite RFK Jr. claiming:

The current recommendations are, I think, around 77 and I have a vaccine record for my child and there are not 77, 70, 77 dose. There are 72 doses of 16 vaccines. Oh, that's just a fact.

One wonders why RFK Jr. doesn't actually show the vaccine record for his child, presumably his youngest, who was born in 2001. Let's take a look at the [recommended vaccine schedule for 2000](#):

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Add it up!

Even using RFK Jr.'s deceptive method of counting multivalent vaccines like MMR and DTaP as three each (because they contain three different vaccines), the most "doses" of vaccine that I can come up with is 40 given in 24 total shots, way short of RFK Jr.'s claim. Seriously, people. This information is not difficult to find. Even if you use the 2005 CDC-recommended schedule and RFK Jr.'s deceptive method, the number of total vaccine "doses" only goes up by a few. Moreover, even if you accept RFK Jr.'s method of coming up with the highest number of vaccine "doses" that you can, so what? Nowhere does he demonstrate that the vaccine schedule, which is science-based, causes harm. Indeed, as Dr. Paul Offit and other vaccine advocates like to point out, thanks to more precise design of modern vaccines, even though the number of vaccines has increased, the number of antigens in the vaccine schedule has decreased markedly, as our friend [Skeptical Raptor](#) has pointed out:

Although the current routine childhood vaccine schedule contains more vaccines than the schedule in the late 1990s, the maximum number of antigens that a child could be exposed to by 2 years of age in 2013 is 315, compared with several thousand in the late 1990s. For example the older whole-cell pertussis vaccine contained over 3000 different antibodies, whereas the new acellular vaccine, a part of DTaP, contains fewer than 6.

Basically, RFK Jr. is parroting a common antivax claim that he helped pioneer that children receive way too many vaccines too soon, supposedly overwhelming their immature immune systems. It's utter BS, and reporters should know that whenever he trots out this trope, as he does quite often and has been doing for two decades. There's no excuse not to be aware of it.

RFK Jr. did ultimately say:

I would be against mandates at all, for any vaccines, for any vaccine.

But he never answered which three vaccines he got as a kid; instead, Hunt pivoted to the war in the Middle East and discussing RFK Jr.'s claim over the summer that SARS-CoV-2 is an "ethnically targeted bioweapon." I've [written a whole typically long post about this conspiracy theory](#), and RFK Jr. does nothing more than repeat it, but more carefully in order to make himself seem less bonkers. So let's move on to his other key lie.

## **Vaccines are not "safety tested"? Nonsense!**

Again, Hunt did much better than at least 95% of journalists who interview RFK Jr. do when he starts doing his antivax Gish gallop, but she missed a big one, namely his claim that vaccines are not "safety tested" before release. You might hear that claim and wonder, "WTF?" You'd be correct to do so, because this false claim relies on a very specific, very narrow definition of "safety testing" that I've written about before. Let's circle back to exactly what he said, because he was very lawyerly, very careful about how he phrased his claim that "none of the vaccines that's currently on the mandated schedule for children, the 72 vaccines, have ever been studied in a pre-licensing safety study."

One might wonder what RFK Jr. means by "pre-licensing safety study." One key word is "pre-licensing." He therefore means the testing done on vaccines before the FDA approves them for their intended indication and the CDC recommends adding them to the vaccine schedule. He does not mean all the post-licensure vaccine safety monitoring systems out there, such as the [Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System \(VAERS\)](#), a passive monitoring system, and active monitoring systems such as [Vaccine Safety Datalink \(VSD\)](#). Contrary to the way that antivaxxers like to try to abuse VAERS, a lot of resources and effort are used to mine the data in VAERS and VSD for signals that might indicate a safety problem with individual vaccines.

He therefore must mean the clinical trials required by the FDA before approving vaccines—and other pharmaceutical and biologicals—for licensure, specifically the phase 3 randomized controlled clinical trials carried out before a vaccine is licensed. So, just what the heck does he mean? This is really the only area where I have significant criticism of how Hunt handled it. I would have asked, "Wait a minute. What do you mean when you say that none of these vaccines has ever been studied in a pre-licensing safety? What about the large phase 3 randomized controlled clinical trials that the FDA requires to approve a new medication or vaccine?" Had she done that, I rather suspect that it would have quickly become apparent that what RFK Jr. really means when he says that "none of the vaccines that's currently on the mandated schedule for children, the 72 vaccines, have ever been studied in a pre-licensing safety study" is that they haven't undergone testing in a double-blind randomized clinical trial (RCT) controlled using a saline placebo.

Again, I recently [wrote an entire long post \(as have others\)](#) about why this claim is deceptive and doesn't

mean that vaccines are unsafe or even that they've never been "safety tested," it's worth doing the Cliffs Notes version about why this claim is deceptive BS:

- **Ethics.** In the event that a safe and effective vaccine already exists and is considered the standard of preventative care for a given disease (e.g., measles), it is unethical to do a double-blind saline controlled clinical trial for that vaccine, because such a trial would require intentionally causing harm by randomizing children to a group that is left unprotected against that disease. There would be no clinical equipoise, which is defined as a genuine uncertainty over which group will do better or worse in an RCT, a non-negotiable ethical requirement for a clinical trial to be considered ethical to carry out. For such vaccines, the appropriate comparator is not saline, but the existing vaccine using a design that can show at least non-inferiority. Dr. Paul Offit called this gambit the "casual cruelty of placebo-controlled trials," and he was quite correct. Of course, antivaxxers like RFK Jr. don't care about unnecessarily exposing the control group of such a study to disease.
- **Vaccines *have* been tested in saline-controlled RCTs.** Unlike the case for a vaccine against a disease for which safe and effective vaccines already exist, for a new disease (like COVID-19) or a disease for which no approved vaccine yet exists, the appropriate RCT is an RCT in which the new vaccine is compared to saline. Moreover, if you look at diseases for which there already are vaccines and go back in time, you will nearly always find that the first vaccine against that disease was tested against an inert placebo like saline.
- **Saline and water are *not* the only scientifically valid placebos for RCT design of an injectable.** As I discussed in my post on the subject, there are a number of scientifically valid designs for RCTs that do not involve having an "inert" placebo as a control. Indeed, for vaccines, often the best design is to use as a placebo a formulation that has everything that is in the vaccine normally other than the antigen, to make it as close to indistinguishable from the real vaccine as possible. Yes, that can mean including adjuvants, such as aluminum.

I'll conclude this section by [quoting Dr. Offit](#) on why RFK Jr.'s misunderstanding safety testing and clinical trials is "casual cruelty," using the original massive RCT used to demonstrate the efficacy and safety of the Salk polio vaccine:

The casual cruelty expressed by ICAN's lawyer can also be found in an event that occurred almost 70 years ago. In 1954, 420,000 first and second graders in the United States were inoculated with Jonas Salk's inactivated polio vaccine; 200,000 were inoculated with salt water. It was one of the largest placebo-controlled trials of a medical product in history. Jonas Salk didn't want to do it. He couldn't conscience giving a saltwater shot to young children when as many as 50,000 were paralyzed by polio and 1,500 died every year. When the trial was over, the vaccine was declared "safe, effective, and potent." Church bells rang out; synagogues held special prayer meetings; department store patrons stopped to listen to the results of the trial over loudspeakers. How did we know that Jonas Salk's polio vaccine was effective? We knew because 16 children died from polio in that study—all in the placebo group. We knew because 34 of the 36 children paralyzed by polio in that study were in the placebo group. These are the

gentle heroes we leave behind.

I suspect that none of the parents who volunteered for Jonas Salk's polio vaccine trial were hoping their children were in the placebo group.

RFK Jr.'s obstinate, unethical, and unscientific insistence that the only valid pre-licensure safety testing of a vaccine is a double-blind, saline placebo-controlled clinical trial, would, if instituted as FDA policy, require that this sort of casual cruelty to be repeated again and again and again—unnecessarily so in the vast majority of cases. It's important to remember that when RFK Jr. claims that vaccines are not "safety tested," he has a very specific and scientifically unsupportable definition of "safety testing."

## **Kasie Hunt did way better than average with RFK Jr., but journalists need to do better still**

One advantage of having paid attention to the antivaccine movement for a quarter of a century and RFK Jr. for nearly two decades is that I have become familiar with all the longstanding antivax tropes and recognize them when I see them. Moreover, I can recognize them when they show up under different guises, a skill that came in very handy during the COVID-19 pandemic, as old antivax tropes were resurrected in new protean forms. I don't expect reporters, particularly political reporters, to have that deep well of knowledge, and I thought that Hunt did do a fine job, generally. My main purpose in writing this was to highlight how doing a fine job isn't good enough with RFK Jr. now that he's running for President and commands more and wider media attention than he ever has before.

Unfortunately, with RFK Jr. running for President and raking in all sorts of cash that will make it impossible to ignore him, anticipating just what he will answer in an interview in response to a question and being ready with clips to bring home the evidence are not enough. You have to think two or three moves ahead at least, and doing that requires developing a deep knowledge of the antivaccine claims that he's been making since at least 2005 and then using that knowledge every time he tries to deny being antivaccine.

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