

## Following the science until she didn't - Rochelle Walensky and revised Omicron Covid-19 guidelines

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The internet memes and jokes on Twitter popped up immediately. After a year and a half's communication of a conservative approach (and repetition of the mantra "following the science") from the U.S. Center for Disease Control (C.D.C.), Rochelle Walensky, Director and her agency's credibility were under fire over new guidelines that were issued during the most contagious, Omicron wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic was caused by the SARS-cov 2 virus that had infected and killed millions of people globally. A sudden reverse in course left the public, government officials, and some of their scientists confused about Walensky's approach, wondering if they were giving up fighting the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

### **Federal Government Agency – The Center for Disease Control**

The Center for Disease Control (C.D.C.), founded in 1946, was a significant part of the U.S. government's Department of Health & Human Services, led by Secretary Xavier Becerra. Headquartered in Atlanta, GA, with over 15,000 employees, the mission of the C.D.C. was to:

"[P]rotect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S. Whether diseases start at home or abroad, are chronic or acute, curable or preventable, human error or deliberate attack, C.D.C. fights disease and supports communities and citizens to do the same" (cdc.gov, 2022).

They used an evidence-based approach supported by science defined by the C.D.C. as "the practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research." ("Evidence Based Practice", n.d.).

## **Covid 19 Pandemic**

In November 2019, a virus was first identified in Wuhan, China, that became a global pandemic. The virus (Covid-19) spread internationally over the winter/early spring of the following year, causing lockdowns in the U.S. in March of 2020. Schools and businesses were closed. People were told by their governments not to leave their homes, to wear masks, and to avoid gathering in groups. As the virus spread during 2020 and 2021, schools/workers/businesses remained remote or hybrid, and mask-wearing/social distancing became a partisan issue deepening the political divide in the U.S. and abroad.

Since the pandemic's beginning, the C.D.C. had been responsible for providing guidance to the government and the American public on Covid-19. Their advice was to do everything to "Stop the Spread" to avoid overwhelming the health system and to protect children, the elderly, and the immunocompromised. One of the many guidelines was that a positive Covid-19 result would result in a 10-14 day quarantine regardless of symptoms and a negative test to return to school/work.

Seemingly good news came on the horizon in January 2021. Vaccines were approved for emergency use for adults. Many of the U.S. population welcomed these new tools as ways to avoid severe complications from the virus. However, a significant minority of Americans and politicians were increasingly hostile (and violent in some cases) to vaccine and mask mandates, causing even more challenges for communication coming from the C.D.C. Public trust in medical scientists had sharply decreased. According to surveys conducted by the Pew Center for Research at the end of 2021, only "29% of U.S. adults say they have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interests of the public, down from 40% who said this in November 2020" (Kennedy et al., 2022). Reactions to the C.D.C. and Covid-19 guidance had become politicized along the lines of the two major parties in the U.S. For example, agreement with having "a great deal of confidence" rate among Republican and Republican-leaning Americans was 13% compared to 44% of Democrat and Democrat-leaning voters (Kennedy et al., 2022).

Many public displays of dissatisfaction and hostility about Covid vaccines during this period. One example is how thousands of people marched in Washington to protest vaccine mandates at the height of infections of the Omicron wave in January 2022. Protesters were chanting phrases and displaying signs that said: "Take those masks off! It's all a lie" and "I have natural immunity" (Mettler et al., 2022).

### **Communication Challenges for the C.D.C. Director**

Dr. Rochelle Walensky had spent her whole medical career focused on public health. Being appointed in January 2021 as the Director of the C.D.C. during the worst pandemic in modern history was a big undertaking, but she was prepared. Walensky's experience in infectious disease was extensive. Her resume included developing treatments for H.I.V., working as a fellow in the Massachusetts General Hospital/Brigham and Women's Hospital Infectious Diseases Fellowship Program, and earning a Master's in Public Health in clinical effectiveness from Harvard. This education and experience made her a medically appropriate and highly trained choice for the C.D.C. position. Her medical qualifications, however, did not prepare her for the high public profile during a 1.5+ year pandemic.

Dr. Walensky received criticism as soon as she was appointed as C.D.C. Director. Her reserved, scientific demeanor was a noticeable contrast to the affable, straight-shooting personality of Dr. Anthony Fauci, who had been the familiar public face since the beginning of the pandemic. Walensky was required to undergo media training four months into her new role, but the results of that tutelage had yet to be seen.

As reported in *The Boston Globe*, Walensky's first year brought many challenges. There had been a chain of perceived (and actual) blunders, and conflicting communication by the C.D.C. since she had taken the helm (Bidgood & Freyer, 2022):

- February 2021 - Walensky said vaccines for teachers weren't prerequisites for safely reopening schools. The White House then appeared not to support that claim (Bidgood & Freyer, 2022).

- March 2021 – "[Walensky] suggested vaccinated people do not carry the virus, something that turned out not to be true and was subsequently walked back by agency staff" (Bidgood & Freyer, 2022).
- May 2021 – Walensky said masks were important but then said fully vaccinated individuals could stop wearing them (however, proof of vaccination was not required). The consequence of this communication was that the lack of mask-wearing likely fueled the rise of the Delta variant in the summer of 2021 (Bidgood & Freyer, 2022).
- September 2021 – The C.D.C. disagreed with the White House and F.D.A. about booster shots. President Biden touted booster shots for every eligible American. Walensky stated booster shots should only be available to vulnerable populations:

"I believe we can best serve the nation's public health needs by providing booster doses for the elderly, those in long-term care facilities, people with underlying medical conditions, and for adults at high risk of disease from occupational and institutional exposures to COVID-19. This aligns with the F.D.A.'s booster authorization and makes these groups eligible for a booster shot." (Center for Disease Control, 2021)

The rollout was stalled at a critical juncture as the Omicron variant emerged.

For Americans who already believed that the government was overreacting about Covid-19, this confusion provided more support for their argument, and Walensky was their new target. Those trying to follow the rules were increasingly frustrated by the contradictions and lack of clarity, further discrediting the new C.D.C. head. Businesses battered economically by the pandemic were eager to return to normal as they knew there wouldn't be any more stimulus money coming from the federal government. Regardless of how any individual felt about C.D.C., the overwhelming feelings across America were vexation and exhaustion.

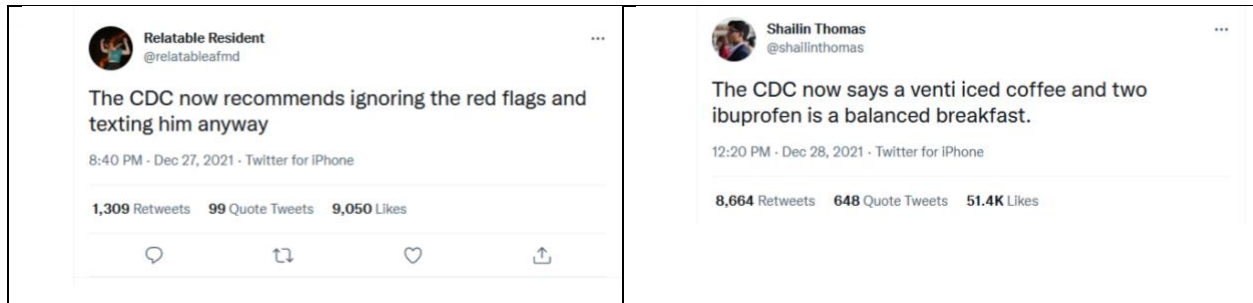
## Fall of 2021

In the fall of 2021, Americans were starting to feel like there was "light at the end of the tunnel" with Covid-19 (Stein & Wroth, 2021). Cases and deaths were beginning to decline again after the Delta surge. Vaccination rates were high in many states. The U.S. Government and C.D.C. reassured people that vaccines provided good protection against serious illness and death. Only a small percentage of the vaccinated would have "breakthrough infections" that would be mild and less deadly. The holidays were coming in the U.S., and people weary of a year and a half of social isolation were excited to gather with family and friends for the upcoming holiday season.

Then what felt like the unthinkable happened. Just as Americans were gathering and enjoying their Thanksgiving turkey and pumpkin pie, the U.S. was hearing reports of a new, highly contagious variant of Covid-19 emerging out of South Africa called Omicron. Cases surged quickly from the first diagnosed case in the U.S. on December 1 to 488,000 cases by December 27 and climbed precipitously (Helmore, 2021). Breakthrough infections were increasing. Even though Omicron was a milder variant of the virus, the sheer volume of infections caused hospitals to overflow again with Covid-19 patients. The joyous Christmas that so many anticipated became a worrisome nightmare.

Therefore, people were baffled when Walensky directed revised Covid guidelines without any prior notice on December 27, 2021 - <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s1227-isolation-quarantine-guidance.html>.

The biggest shock of this announcement was the seemingly overnight shortening of the recommended isolation time from ten days down to five days without requiring testing. "There was no initial explanation of the science behind the move, leaving experts and the public alike to wonder about its basis" (Bidgood & Freyer, 2022). Reports were that Walensky had "eschewed traditional C.D.C. processes" and did not consult the experts (Collins et al., 2022). Had Walensky decided to abandon their fight against the Covid-19 virus? The internet seemed to think so:



(Relatable, 2021) (Thomas, 2021)

Both Walensky's and the C.D.C.'s credibility were damaged yet again, and attempts to clarify further confused the public. Where had she gone wrong again with the communication of this most recent message?