

CDC Officials Who Spread Misinformation Apologized to Source of False Data but Not to Public: Emails

COVID NEWS



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The Emergency Operations Center at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Ga., on March 19, 2021. (Eric Baradat/AFP via Getty Images)

U.S. health officials who spread inflated [COVID-19](#) child death data in public meetings apologized to the source of the false data but not to the public, newly obtained emails show.

Drs. Katherine Fleming-Dutra and Sara Oliver, with the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), [offered the false data](#) in 2022 while U.S. officials weighed granting emergency authorization to COVID-19 vaccines for children as young as 6 months.

The study they cited for the data was published ahead of peer review by a group comprised primarily of British authors. The study [was corrected](#) after the public meetings.

Emails obtained by The Epoch Times [showed](#) that Fleming-Dutra and Oliver were alerted that they had spread misinformation. Neither the officials nor the CDC have informed the public of the false information. [Newly obtained emails](#) showed the officials apologized to Seth Flaxman, one of the study's authors, and even offered to see whether the study could be published in the CDC's quasi-journal.

"I feel ... that we owe you an apology," Oliver wrote to Flaxman on June 27, about 10 days after she and Fleming-Dutra falsely said there had been at least 1,433 deaths primarily attributed to COVID-19 in America among those 19 and younger. "We draw the attention of a variety of individuals with the ACIP meetings, and apologize that you got caught in it this time."

"I am also sorry that you got pulled into the attention around the VRBPAC and ACIP meetings," Fleming-Dutra added. She had presented the data to the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, which advises the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which advises the CDC.

Fleming-Dutra, Oliver, and Flaxman did not respond to requests for comment.

Inflated Death Toll

Using data from the CDC, Flaxman and his co-authors claimed that there were at least 1,433 deaths primarily attributed to COVID-19 among those aged 0 to 19 in the United States. The actual number was 1,088, the authors acknowledged in the corrected version of the study.

Fleming-Dutra presented the false data as rankings to VRBPAC on June 14, 2022 and ACIP three days later. It's not clear why the CDC didn't examine its own database rather than relying on a preprint study.

Oliver also cited the study while speaking during the ACIP meeting.

The data had an impact. It showed "that this is not a minor illness in children," Dr. Katherine Poehling, one of the ACIP members, said at the time.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC's director, later appeared to cite the inflated death toll and ACIP still [cites the preprint](#), though it was later updated with the correct data.

Flaxman updated the study after receiving an email from Kelley Krohnert, a Georgia resident who has become a fact-checker of suspect COVID-19-related claims.

Krohnert's concerns also made their way to Fleming-Dutra and Oliver, but the CDC officials have never publicly acknowledged promoting misinformation.

'We Had an Error'

Flaxman acknowledged in emails to Krohnert, and in a June 27 message to Fleming-Dutra and Oliver, that he did not fully understand how the CDC's death database works.

"Thanks for your work, and your great presentations to VRBPAC and ACIP. You cited our preprint. We've just updated it (see attached; it should appear on medrxiv in the next day). While none of the substantive conclusions change, we had an error which you may have seen was picked up very prominently by a blogger," Flaxman wrote. "I am writing first to say sorry—I really regret that this happened. It was my mistake in misunderstanding the [death certificate] data, and not realizing about CDC Wonder's provisional database."

Flaxman also asked for feedback on the updated study and whether the officials could help with submitting the paper to the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), a quasi-journal the CDC publishes that only includes articles ([pdf](#)) vetted and shaped by top CDC officials to align with the agency's policies.

"We've never tried to publish there, so I don't know the process or how often they consider manuscripts from non-CDC authors," Flaxman said. "If you do think this would be a possible route, perhaps one or both of you would want to help us revise the manuscript and join as an author?"

Oliver wrote back first, saying that she wanted to apologize to Flaxman and that "we will absolutely review and provide feedback," as well as context.

"We are more than happy to do that without formally being co-authors. That way you can avoid formal CDC clearance," Oliver wrote.

Fleming-Dutra then chimed in with her apology, adding, "I am glad to hear that you and your team are continuing to do this important work." She recommended Flaxman and his team review studies published in the MMWR to get a sense of the format of the digest. A large portion of her email was redacted under an exemption to the Freedom of Information Act for "inter-agency or intra-agency records." The Epoch Times has appealed that and other redactions.

Flaxman then notified the CDC officials that the corrected study had been made public. Fleming-Dutra replied, but the email was redacted.

“Thanks, very useful feedback. Small update: we’re hoping to submit to JAMA Pediatrics in the next week or so, and [redacted],” Flaxman answered. He indicated that the CDC had provided feedback and questioned on how to cite it in the submission.

“I was also wondering if you have any NCHS [National Center for Health Statistics] contacts who it would be worth us reaching out to for feedback? I’d particularly like to understand the completeness of WONDER Provisional Mortality Statistics when it comes to Covid versus other causes of death as we don’t fully describe that at the moment,” Flaxman also wrote.

Yet another reply from Fleming-Dutra was redacted, and the chain ended there.

Krohnert told The Epoch Times in an email that it is “frustrating that the CDC seemed to care more about the negative attention the preprint authors received than about the fact that the data the CDC presented at the ACIP and VRBPAC meetings was incorrect.”

“It feels like a good pro-vaccine PR message exaggerating the risk to children was more important than the truth,” Krohnert said.