

October 28, 2024

The Honorable Monica Bertagnolli
Director
National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Bertagnolli:

I write with regard to the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) funding of Dr. Johanna Olsen-Kennedy's study on the effects of exposing children to puberty blockers. More than nine years after the Obama Administration supported this study, researchers have yet to release their findings, and have reportedly refused to do so because they are concerned about the political ramifications of their findings. It is not Dr. Olsen-Kennedy's place to make this decision, but rather the American people, who funded this study, and their elected representatives.

The NIH is a vital institution—trusted to accelerate high-quality research to solve some of the most vexing health challenges of our time. When the American people hire scientists, through research grants, to study the great health challenges of our time, we place a trust in those scientists to carefully disentangle their own political penchants from their research. Sadly, it appears Dr. Olsen-Kennedy has abused her position of trust in order to masquerade political ideology under a veil of scientific legitimacy.

As you may know, Dr. Johanna Olsen-Kennedy was one in a group of researchers who received funding from a \$5.7 million NIH award to study the physical and mental outcomes of children who receive hormone blockers or cross-sex hormones. In a 2020 report, Olsen-Kennedy initially stated that approximately a quarter of the youth in her study were experiencing suicidal ideation or depression symptoms. Recently, she has walked back these claims, making contradictory statements that the reason puberty blockers did not improve the mental health of children participating in her study is because the children were "in really good shape" before the study began. Though Dr. Olsen-Kennedy has claimed that she intends to publish the data, she has delayed doing so because, according to her, she fears the findings will be used to show that puberty blockers do not improve the mental health of youth. Commonsense Americans already understand this and are rightly outraged that these drugs are being used on children, some as young as 11 years old. The fact that Dr. Olsen-Kennedy is hiding the results of her *publicly-funded* research, because of her political bias, is outrageous and unacceptable.

During a 2022 Senate Committee on Appropriations hearing, I questioned former NIH Director, Dr. Lawrence Tabak, about the safety and efficacy of exposing children to puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones. Dr. Tabak told the committee that the NIH "funds a small

number of observational studies to gather the data on the effects of treatments that transgender youth and their parents have chosen... But all of the research in this space is observational. We do no interventional work.” Dr. Olsen-Kennedy’s track record directly contradicts this claim. No taxpayer money should be spent harming children in this way. Yet, because of the Obama Administration’s reckless disregard for children’s safety, hundreds of children were exposed to harmful chemicals through this \$5.7 million grant, and Americans deserve to know the full implications of the project their tax dollars paid for.

I remain deeply concerned that the author’s lengthy delay in publishing final results for this study suggests an intent to manipulate the data and conclusions for their desired outcome, compromising scientific integrity. The NIH must investigate this group of researchers to assess whether they are intentionally withholding information from the public about the truth of using puberty blockers on youth, and prevent them from receiving future federal funding. I also request a response to the following questions:

1. As Dr. Olsen-Kennedy has provided conflicting information, please clarify the mental state of the children included in the study prior to receiving puberty blockers.
2. Does the NIH take political bias on research questions into consideration when awarding grant funding to researchers?
3. How is the NIH ensuring that bias and/or manipulation of data does not occur in federally funded research?
4. Did researchers in this study comply with the NIH’s requirement to annually submit their progress to the NIH?
5. When will the researchers submit the final conclusions of their study and make the data public?

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator