

# Backlash over doctor's shift on COVID highlights growing split

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## FULL TEXT

Conventions of public health leaders are normally sedate affairs. But not the one coming to Boston in November. In a sign that the polarization that has riven much of American society has permeated even the ranks of scientific discourse, hundreds of researchers and advocates have mobilized to have a prominent doctor and media commentator disinvited from the American Public Health Association's annual conference.

The controversy swirling around the conference at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center is shining a spotlight on the growing rift among public health professionals as well as ordinary Americans over how the United States moves forward with COVID-19.

More than 600 people in the public health field signed a letter to the association last month urging it to disinvite Dr. Leana Wen, a public health professor at George Washington University, CNN medical analyst, and contributing columnist for The Washington Post.

The letter says that Wen has used her platform on news outlets and social media to promote unscientific and unethical ideas.

"We believe that APHA, as the foremost and largest public health organization in the United States, has an obligation to consider the ways that platforming her as a public health leader lends credence to her harmful messaging," the letter said.

"This is a fight over the heart of public health," said Justin Feldman, a social epidemiologist and a health and human rights fellow at the Harvard FXB Center for Health & Human Rights, who signed the letter.

Wen pivoted a year ago from championing pandemic mandates, such as required masking and vaccines for travel, to advocating since early this year for a return to normal life —even as Omicron raced through many areas of the country.

The growing backlash against her crystalizes an increasingly contentious debate in public health. Critics say the push to drop all pandemic mitigation measures abandons people who are most at risk to serious illness from COVID-19, including older Americans and those who are immunocompromised, as well as low-income people and some communities of color, who are less able to afford at-home rapid tests or absences from work when they are infected.

But other public health leaders contend that Wen's current stance is more in line with that of most Americans who have moved on, eschewing masks and resuming many of their pre-pandemic activities. They say her positions on masking and easing other pandemic precautions are similar to the current guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The White House's chief medical adviser, Dr. Anthony Fauci, generally echoes CDC guidance, but he has been encouraging mask-wearing in recent media interviews, telling ABC News in July that "you can still protect yourself very well with a properly fitted, adequate mask."

Wen, who ironically is slated to speak about "Harassment, bullying and death threats: Staying the course while under attack," at the Boston conference, has faced considerable criticism and threats for her high-profile positions. A Texas man was recently sentenced to six months in prison for threatening Wen last year over her advocacy of COVID vaccines, while a Massachusetts man was charged last month with allegedly sending Wen threatening e-

mails at her home in Maryland. She is married and has two young children, ages 2 and 5.

"There is backlash from all sides," Wen said in an interview.

She said her perspective on strict COVID precautions began evolving in early 2021, after vaccines started to become more widely available, and that by February of this year, when so many people had been infected with the Omicron variant, it became "very obvious to me that COVID is here to stay and that elimination is unfortunately not on the table anymore."

In a recent Washington Post column, Wen said her children would not wear masks this school year and that she accepted the risk they may catch COVID-19 "just as they could contract the flu." But she acknowledged some families may maintain strict precautions, while others may strike a balance, and that "there are no easy, one-size-fits-all answers."

In an interview, she said that instead of reinstating mask mandates, federal leaders should instead spend precious public health capital on other urgent issues, such as ensuring children are immunized against polio amid signs of a resurgence in New York.

"I worry if we say to people we need masking when most Americans are not doing it . . . we are going to lose them in the bigger scheme of things," she said.

But for some who signed the letter against Wen, that logic doesn't hold up.

"The role of public health is to tell people this is not over," said Natasha Sokol, an assistant professor at Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School who studies how social factors influence health and disease.

"The less that we do to try and prevent [COVID], the longer this is going to go on and the worse it's going to become," she said.

Other health leaders who didn't sign the letter have taken to Twitter to voice support for Wen, including Dr. Scott Gottlieb, a former Food and Drug Administration commissioner, who called her views "grounded in good intent and rational facts." Dr. Jeffrey Flier, former dean of Harvard Medical School, called the initiative to cancel Wen "absurd and disturbing."

Arthur Caplan, director of medical ethics at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine, takes a middle ground. He doesn't agree with many of Wen's points but said calls to cancel her are misguided because candid debate on the issues is important.

"People don't like to wear seat belts, but they wear seat belts," he said. "Public health has not historically been built on opinion polls or what people want to do."

He said the backlash against Wen is a culmination of anger over what he sees as a failure by federal public health leaders to communicate clear, consistent information during the pandemic.

"She just happens to become the flashpoint," he said.

A recent Annenberg Public Policy Center poll suggests that many Americans are more in line with Wen's thinking. It found that while most people know at least one person who died of COVID, and many know someone who has experienced long COVID, a majority of Americans (54 percent) say they rarely or never wear a mask indoors with people from outside their household —more than double the proportion in January. And 41 percent say they have already returned to their "normal, pre-Covid-19 life" —up from 16 percent in January.

Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, said Wen, who is not being paid for her appearance, will not be canceled.

"Our position is that Dr. Wen has been in the mainstream of scientific thought on public health," he said. "I understand there are folks that may disagree with that."

And he added, "Let's have a conversation about the issue and not the individual."

Roughly 10,000 people are expected to attend the conference, he said. And while indoor mask mandates are rare now, the association will require masks indoors at the conference, at the urging of many members.

Sokol, of Brown University, said she likely will not be attending, not because of her objection to Wen, but because of her concern that such a large gathering might seed many more COVID infections. She said the mounting debates over how to live with COVID have left her adrift.

"I have been in public health my entire career, and seeing all the institutions I have always looked to shift their guidance away from public health is entirely disorienting," she said. "It's hard to know where to go from here."

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Credit: By Kay Lazar GLOBE STAFF

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