

## COVID Policy: The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Gilbert Berdine MD

The tale of the Sorcerer's Apprentice is part of ancient folklore.<sup>1</sup> A poem written by Goethe in 1797—*Der Zauberlehrling*—is a well-known version and has been translated into a modern English translation.<sup>2</sup> Goethe's poem was set to music by the French composer Paul Dukas in 1897. The story of Goethe and music of Dukas were animated by Disney as part of the 1940 film *Fantasia* with Mickey Mouse starring as the role of the Apprentice.

*Now that the old sorcerer has left me on my own at last,  
I can make his forces labor just exactly as I ask.  
I've learned in this tower, all his words and spells,  
With these mental powers, his art is mine as well.*

The Apprentice is faced with a tedious task—cleaning the house—and wants to use magic spirits to make the task easier. He enchants the broomsticks.

*So come on, you dry old broomstick! Wrap yourself in  
these old rags;  
Servant is what you are, toothpick; Obey me now and  
do not lag!  
Stand up here on two legs, screw a head on top,  
Run down to the stream's edge, with the water pot!  
Hurry, hurry, fetch the water, bring it quickly, come get  
going,  
Fill the buckets and don't dawdle, fill the bath, we need  
it flowing!*

At first, everything seems to be working out as planned.

*Look, it's running to the river; see, it's made it to the  
stream,  
Like an arrow from a quiver, shooting its way straight to  
me.  
There and back already, for the second time,  
Filling buckets stead'ly, as the water climbs!*

**Corresponding author:** Gilbert Berdine  
**Contact Information:** Gilbert.Berdine@ttuhsc.edu  
**DOI:** 10.12746/swrccc.v11i46.1125

The Apprentice, however, like many modern scientists, forgot the OFF switch.

*Cease now! Cease now! Stand and heed me! Halt!  
Obey! I must be heard!  
Oh now, what now, can't believe this! I don't know the  
magic word!*

The story concludes with the Apprentice appealing to the Master to solve the problem and avoid catastrophe. The Master saves the day.

*Broomstick! Broomstick! To the corner, go now, I'm the  
master here!  
Spirits, spirits! When I need you, only then may you  
appear.*

### LOCKDOWNS

When the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in the United States, academic and government authorities proposed strict isolation measures to combat spread of the virus. Lockdowns started with a plausible premise that the virus spread by human contact, so isolation would stop viral spread. These authorities, however, ignored the problem that in our modern economy human contact is necessary for survival. Recently, *The Atlantic* published an appeal for a pandemic amnesty.<sup>3</sup> “Our cloth masks made out of old bandanas wouldn't have done anything, anyway. But the thing is: **We didn't know.**”

Other people did know, however, gave warnings, and were either ignored or demonized. My warnings in this journal were ignored.<sup>4</sup> I was one of the lucky dissenters. The authors of the Great Barrington Declaration<sup>5</sup> were victims of a vicious campaign coordinated between government and media to ridicule, defame, and even deplatform any dissent from the government narrative. Dissenting views about government policy on masks, social distancing, lockdowns, and the origin of the virus have gone from conspiracy theory to mainstream acceptance or even generally accepted fact. Authorities who previously made weekly

public pronouncements about the necessity of lockdowns either cannot recall their previous statements or deny that they made them.<sup>6</sup>

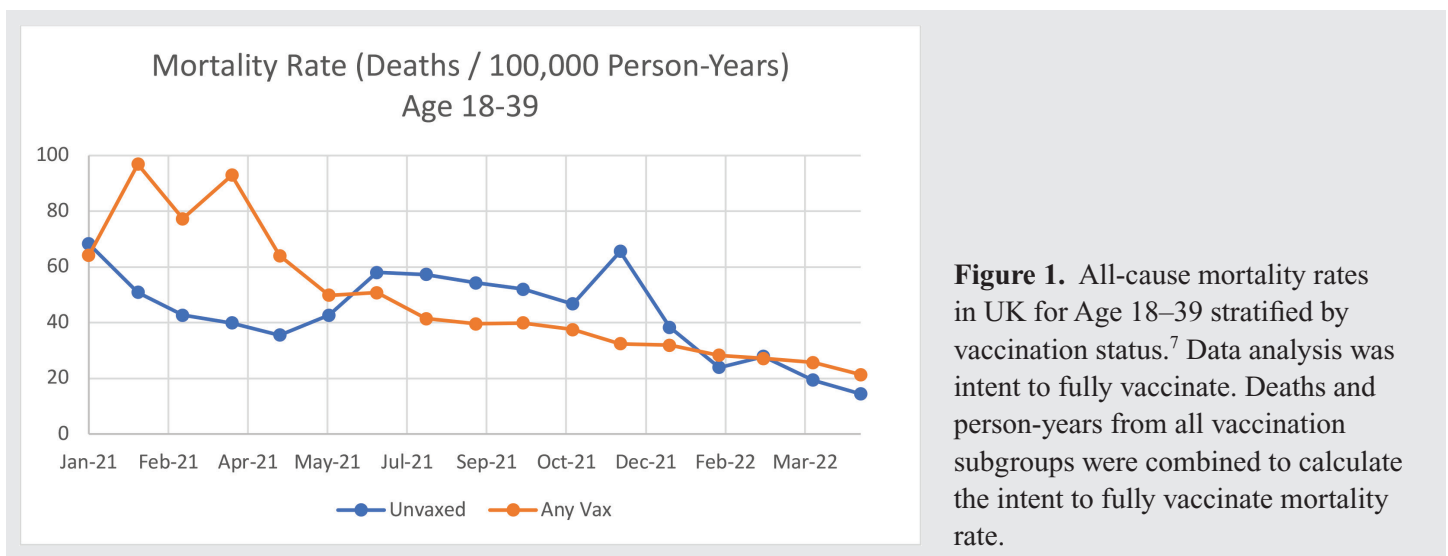
### VACCINES

The government has repeatedly declared COVID vaccines to be safe and effective. The acceptance of vaccines has been legally mandated in some circumstances. Dissent from the government narrative has been defined to be disinformation or misinformation. Yet, facts and data are stubborn things. Despite vaccination of over a majority of the population, and declining cases of COVID, mortality rates in the U.S. continued to increase in 2021 and will likely increase, again, in 2022. The CDC has not demonstrated any interest in explaining the excess deaths. Given the absence of official explanations, the public has advanced its own theories. One theory is that adverse events attributable to the vaccine are responsible for the excess deaths. The CDC has data on all-cause mortality stratified by vaccination status, yet it refuses to release this data to the public. Why? The U.K. has released such data.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1 illustrates the all-cause mortality rates for unvaccinated and vaccinated people of age 18–39 in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The data for all months for which data are available are shown. The analysis of

all-cause mortality avoids any problems of deciding which deaths were due to COVID-19 and which deaths were due to the vaccine. The intent to fully vaccinate avoids immortal time bias introduced by people who have not reached full vaccination status. For example, analysis of only people who were vaccinated at least 21 days following the 3<sup>rd</sup> dose or booster does not consider adverse events that occurred immediately following the 3<sup>rd</sup> dose, or people who died following the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> doses, or people who decided against subsequent doses of vaccine due to non-fatal adverse events from earlier doses. If the vaccine is safe, then there should be no deaths from adverse events. If the vaccine is effective, then the vaccinated should be protected from COVID deaths. The net result of safe and effective should be a lower all-cause mortality rate for the vaccinated. The data show otherwise. There is a large net harm of vaccination from February 2021–June 2021, a smaller net benefit from July 2021–January 2022, and smaller still net harm from April 2022–May 2022. There is a net harm averaged over all the months of about 1 excess death per year for every 20,000 vaccinations. Others have reached the same conclusion of net harm by COVID vaccines in university students.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, we do not understand all the features of the data shown in Figure 1. I could reach whatever conclusion I wished by cherry picking the time frame.



**Figure 1.** All-cause mortality rates in UK for Age 18–39 stratified by vaccination status.<sup>7</sup> Data analysis was intent to fully vaccinate. Deaths and person-years from all vaccination subgroups were combined to calculate the intent to fully vaccinate mortality rate.

The totality of data in Figure 1 cannot justify a vaccine mandate for age 18–39. The CDC has known about this information for over a year, yet it refuses to release similar data for people in the United States. The CDC is acting like the Sorcerer's Apprentice wanting the power to command vaccines without knowing the magic word to turn off adverse events. The CDC, however, lacks the honesty of the Sorcerer's Apprentice. The Apprentice eventually realized his limitations and appealed to the Master for help. The CDC is blind to water flooding the house. Rather than appealing for help, the CDC wants to silence, decertify, deplatform, or otherwise punish anyone who points out that the house is flooding.

## DISSENT IS NECESSARY

**“No plan survives the first contact of war.”**  
Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz<sup>9</sup>

Many challenges facing us are too complicated for us to fully understand. We can accurately predict what happens when billiard balls collide. We cannot predict how ecosystems will react to external shocks. Plans need to be flexible to deal with unanticipated consequences. Planners need to be open to dissent and criticism. Machiavelli devotes an entire chapter of *The Prince* (Chapter 23) on avoiding flatterers.

“Therefore, a wise prince ought to hold a third course by choosing the wise men in his state, and giving to them only the liberty of speaking the truth to him, and then only of those things of which he inquires, and of none others; but he ought to question them upon everything, and listen to their opinions, and afterwards form his own conclusions.”<sup>10</sup>

At a minimum, plans need to consider dissent so that Plan B can be formulated in the event—no matter how unlikely—the dissent or criticism turns out to be justified. One cannot plan for contingencies when dissent is punished. Free speech is not some nuisance that must be tolerated for altruistic reasons. Free speech is absolutely necessary to avoid catastrophic failure.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, public policy, discussion, dissent

**Article citation:** Berdine G. COVID Policy: The Sorcerer's Apprentice. *The Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2023;11(46):59–61

**From:** Department of Internal Medicine, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, Lubbock, Texas

**Submitted:** 12/19/2022

**Accepted:** 12/26/2022

**Conflicts of interest:** none

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## REFERENCES

1. Wikipedia contributors. The sorcerer's apprentice. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sorcerer%27s\\_Apprentice/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sorcerer%27s_Apprentice/) Accessed 12/20/2022.
2. Gyagatext. The sorcerer's apprentice, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe a modern translation by Katrin Gygax. [http://www.gyagatext.ch/english\\_translations\\_zurich\\_sorcerers\\_apprentice.html/](http://www.gyagatext.ch/english_translations_zurich_sorcerers_apprentice.html/) Accessed 12/20/2022.
3. Oster E. Let's declare a pandemic amnesty. *The Atlantic*. October 22, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/covid-response-forgiveness/671879/> Accessed 12/20/2022.
4. Berdine G. Coronavirus and health care economics. *The Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles* 2020; 8(34):64–65.
5. Great Barrington Declaration. <https://gbdeclaration.org/> Accessed 12/20/2022.
6. Bovard J. ‘All-knowing’ Tony Fauci’s memory suddenly vanishes when he has to testify. *New York Post*. November 25, 2022. <https://nypost.com/2022/11/25/all-knowing-dr-faucis-memory-suddenly-vanishes-when-he-has-to-testify/> Accessed 12/20/2022.
7. Office for National Statistics. Deaths by vaccination status, England. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/deathsby-vaccinationstatusengland/> Accessed 12/20/2022.
8. Bardosh K, Krug A, Jamrozik E, et al. COVID-19 vaccine boosters for young adults: a risk benefit assessment and ethical analysis of mandate policies at universities. *J Medical Ethics*. 2022.
9. Quote Investigator. No plan survives first contact with the enemy. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2021/05/04/no-plan/> Accessed 12/20/2022.
10. Wikisource contributors. *The Prince* (Marriott)/Chapter 23. Wikisource. [https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Prince\\_\(Marriott\)/Chapter\\_23](https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=The_Prince_(Marriott)/Chapter_23) Accessed 12/20/2022.