Dear Governor Kemp: There Is No AIDS Vaccine

The Georgia governor erroneously claimed that Americans had refused to get a mandated AIDS vaccine. [VIDEO]

September 20, 2021 By Trent Straube

In trying to make his case against requiring people to get COVID-19 vaccines or to wear masks, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, a Republican, drew a parallel to a failed AIDS vaccine mandate, Atlanta's 11Alive reports. Problem is, there has never been an AIDS vaccine—in fact, HIV researchers announced just last month that a large clinical trial for a vaccine had failed—and therefore no mandate could have existed either.

What's more, and this may be nitpicking, the nonexistent vaccine wouldn't be against AIDS, it would be against HIV, the virus that can lead to AIDS.

Kemp made the AIDS vaccine comments during an interview on a recent episode of the Erick Erickson Show podcast. He was apparently trying to make the point that history shows that Americans will not accept vaccine mandates and that the best way to convince them to get the shots is by educating them. (You can listen to the clip in the 11Alive video below.)

"That is basically how the AIDS vaccine worked. People wouldn't take it early on because it was mandated, they started educating people and now it is doing a lot of good out there," Kemp said during the podcast. "Same scenario, different year that we are dealing with right now."

This isn't the first time Kemp has mentioned the nonexistent AIDS vaccine. In September 2020, he said he didn't believe a mask mandate would work—and that he had arrived at this conclusion because of lessons learned from the failed AIDS vaccine mandate.

He repeated the talking point yet again last July. "Well, we are not going to have a statewide mask mandate," he said, according to WFXG. "Dr. [Kathleen] Toomey [the commissioner of the Georgia Department of Public Health] and I believe that they do not work. They did not work with the AIDS vaccine and they're not going to work with the corona vaccine."

In fact-checking Kemp's statements, 11Alive was told that the health commissioner had in fact spoken with the governor about the vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV), an infection that

spreads easily through sexual contact and can lead to cancer later in life. (The HPV vaccine is mandated for public school attendance in some states.) According to a spokesperson for the governor's office, Kemp had simply misspoken.

"The governor was referring to people's initial reaction when the HPV vaccine was made available," the spokesperson told 11Alive. "There was skepticism when it was first rolled out, but with more education about the benefits of the vaccine and as more people talked to their doctor, vaccination rates increased. His point, that we need to continue to educate about the benefits of the vaccine and that the decision to get the COVID-19 vaccine should be a decision between people and a trusted medical provider, is what's important."

> Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp keeps mentioning failed AIDS vaccine mandates. But there is no AIDS vaccine https://t.co/acaK25UQji
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> — Salon (@Salon) September 18, 2021

Certainly everyone has mixed up a word or two while speaking—but three different times about a matter this critical in the span of a year?

The topic of an HIV vaccine has surfaced often during talks about COVID-19, but not in the context that Georgia's governor mentioned. Throughout the past year, skeptics of the COVID-19 vaccine have questioned how COVID-19 vaccines were developed so quickly, when HIV vaccines are taking so long. POZ science editor Liz Highleyman explored the topic in the feature story "A Shot in the Dark," in which she explains why it's harder to develop a vaccine for HIV and details the efforts underway to overcome those challenges.

For another look into the development of vaccines, read our excerpted transcript from a webinar with HIV advocates and researchers titled "Pandemic Vaccine Development and the Lessons for COVID-19."

In related news, researchers announced last month that a potential HIV vaccine regimen that had been tested in the Imbokodo trial failed. This is but one in a string of disappointing trial results spanning the decades of the AIDS epidemic. However, scientists are trying a new approach. They recently launched a trial of vaccines for HIV, using the same mRNA technology used in the highly effective Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 shots.

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