Senate Confirms Vaccine Skeptic and AIDS Denialist RFK Jr. as Health Secretary

As head of the health department, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will influence food and drug safety, research, Medicare, abortion policy and more.

February 13, 2025 By Trent Straube

The Senate confirmed Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the nation's health secretary, NPR reports. After a contentious public hearing that highlighted Kennedy's peddling of anti-vaccine myths, medical misinformation and controversial public health policy, the Senate voted 52–48, mostly along party lines, to confirm. Republican Senator Mitch McConnell, a polio survivor, was the lone GOP lawmaker to side with the Democrats.

RFK Jr will oversee 13 divisions including CMS, NIH, CDC, FDA. A vaccine conspiracist, HIV denialist, COVID misinformation spreader, and nutroceutical peddler who has profited from suing the agency he now leads. The global health impact, including threat preparedness and response, will be profound.

[image or embed]

— Fact Contagion (@factcontagion.bsky.social) February 13, 2025 at 12:46 PM

The health secretary leads the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), a behemoth umbrella agency whose mission is to "to enhance the health and well-being of all Americans, by providing for effective health and human services and by fostering sound, sustained advances in the sciences underlying medicine, public health and social services." HHS oversees more than 13 divisions and 100 programs and services, including:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention;
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services;
- The Food and Drug Administration;
- The National Institutes of Health, which itself is made up of 27 institutes and centers, including the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (which oversees HIV efforts), the National Institute of Aging, the National Human Genome Research Institute;
- The Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response;
- Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships;
- Health Resources and Services Administration;
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The nation's health secretary wields enormous power. "The HHS secretary has the authority to establish regulations that govern health, including food and drug safety, public health and health care quality," explains Céline Gounder, MD, editor-at-large of public health at KFF Health News. "The HHS secretary can declare public health emergencies and coordinate federal responses to health crises, such as disease outbreaks or natural disasters. The secretary wields significant influence over the department's policies and its constituent agencies.… The HHS secretary is also in a position to shape public opinion if given a platform to do so by the media."

This is extremely troubling when you consider that Kennedy is an AIDS denialist who doesn't believes HIV leads to AIDS. "There are much better candidates than HIV for what causes AIDS," he told New York Magazine as recently as 2023. (For the truth of the matter, see the Ask POZ column "How Do We Know HIV Causes AIDS?")

The madness of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

[image or embed]

— Mother Jones (@motherjones.com) February 13, 2025 at 9:30 AM

Conspiracy theories can have deadly consequences. AIDS denialism counted for hundreds of thousands of deaths in South Africa, where people with HIV were denied treatment by its former president from 1999 to 2008. Similarly, Kennedy's misinformation about vaccines fueled a measles outbreak in Samoa in 2019 that included more than 5,700 cases and claimed over 80 lives.

Mother Jones rounds up Kennedy's more outrageous and dangerous views. Just a sampling: He still promotes the debunked idea that vaccines cause autism. He said COVID-19 was engineered to spare Jews—and that the pandemic was planned as a coup to topple democracy. He claims human-made chemicals in the environment can cause children to be gay or transgender. What's more, he has made millions of dollars promoting these lies—over $10 million last year as an anti-vax champion, according to Mother Jones.

Like Trump, Kennedy finds a nemesis and scapegoat in Anthony Fauci, MD, the former head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who, over the course of decades, led the fight against both HIV and COVID-19. Kennedy went so far as to pen (and profit from) the 2021 book The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health.

How Kennedy's leadership at HHS will affect funding and support for public health efforts, including vaccines and research, remains to be seen. Several health experts and leaders across the nation have expressed their willingness to collaborate with the new secretary.

"We stand ready to work with Secretary Kennedy as he and President Trump seek to improve the health of the American people. Ending infectious and chronic diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis, must be a vital component in the administration's initiatives," said Carl Schmid, executive director of the HIV+Hepatitis Policy Institute in a statement. "We were pleased that Kennedy went on

record during his confirmation process and stated, ‘I look forward to continuing the good work that President Trump did in his pursuit to eradicate HIV/AIDS.’” (In Trump’s first term, he launched the national initiative “Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America,” which aimed to lower new HIV rates by 75% by 2025 and by 90% by 2030.)

“Experts in infectious diseases can offer objective insight to Secretary Kennedy and his staff as the nation faces evolving future threats to the health of its citizens,” said Tina Tan, MD, president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. “Secretary Kennedy’s confirmation is an important opportunity to reaffirm the longstanding, overwhelming and settled science regarding the safety and efficacy of vaccines, which remain our best defense against many serious infectious diseases. We look forward to working with lawmakers to hold Secretary Kennedy to his promise to maintain our nation’s vaccine approval and safety framework, including the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, the Vaccines for Children program and other public health vaccine programs.”

Other advocates were less congratulatory. “By measures of expertise and character, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is unfit and unqualified for this position,” said Sinead Murano-Kinney, a health policy analyst at Advocates for Trans Equality. “His rejection of scientific consensus threatens access to critical health care, from vaccines to transgender health care. Despite claims he would ‘follow the science,’ RFK Jr. has previously promoted conspiracy theories such as 5G misinformation, making xenophobic claims that COVID-19 was engineered to target certain populations, he’s compared vaccination mandates to the Third Reich and the Holocaust and demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of public health programs.”

Statements from lawmakers regarding Kennedy’s confirmation seem to fall along party lines, with most Republicans—except McConnell—praising RFK’s assentation as a win for President Trump.

“When Kennedy says he doesn’t believe in vaccines, which he has said many times, believe him. When he says he will do whatever Donald Trump wants on abortion, believe him,” Senator Elizabeth Warren (D–Mass.) said in a floor speech the night before the vote, according to MedPageToday. “Let us be very clear when it comes to your health and well-being and that of your family and your community, he is disqualified, dangerous and can’t be given critical health care decisions.”

Senator Chuck Grassley (R–Iowa) countered that he believes Kennedy will “ensure that key programs such as Medicare and Medicaid are protected by rooting out waste, fraud and abuse.”

A survivor of childhood polio, Sen. Mitch McConnell was the only Republican in the Senate to vote No. Here’s how he explained his vote.

[image or embed]

— NPR (@npr.org) February 13, 2025 at 2:55 PM

“In my lifetime, I’ve watched vaccines save millions of lives from devastating diseases across America and around the world,” McConnell said in a statement explaining his vote. “I will not condone the relitigation of proven cures and neither will millions of Americans who credit their survival and quality of life to scientific miracles.”

Kennedy is the son of U.S. Senator and U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and nephew of former President John F. Kennedy. He has spoken publicly about his former addiction to heroin. He has a law degree but no medical or public health training. He is not a physician.

Kennedy’s confirmation comes amid unfolding chaos among the nation’s health agencies and leaders, thanks mostly to a flurry of executive orders by President Trump slashing research funding and foreign aid, only to be followed by waivers and rescissions. For related news and to learn more, see:

- “How Measles, Whooping Cough and Worse Could Roar Back on RFK Jr.’s Watch,”
- “CDC Pulls, Partially Restores HIV Web Content,”
- “Death, Chaos, Budget Cuts, Exemptions: Updates on Global HIV Program PEPFAR,”
- “What to Know About RFK Jr.’s Stances on Key Health issues and What He Could Do at HHS,”
- “Trump White House Erases, Silences HIV, LGBTQ and Health Content” and
- “Trump’s Order on Gender-Affirming Care Escalates Reversal of Trans Rights,”
- “Trump Muzzles Federal Health Agencies, Withdraws From World Health Organization.”

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