

Robert F. Kennedy Jr's role in Samoan measles epidemic

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In an article in the *Washington Post* on November 15, international health officials expressed alarm over the global impact of the appointment of outspoken anti-vaxxer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (RFK Jr.) as President-elect Trump's nominee to head the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

As the WSWS has noted, among Trump's far-right cabinet selections, the nomination of Kennedy, who has no scientific or medical background, is the most brazen so far. "No other individual could be less qualified or more inadvisable for this position," the WSWS declared, akin to "placing Al Capone at the head of the Department of Justice."

Kennedy is an anti-vaccination zealot and has also opposed pasteurization, water fluoridation and other long-established scientific practices. He has questioned federal agencies charged with vaccine production and safety, promoted false claims linking vaccines to autism and challenged official lists of recommended vaccines for children. He founded and chaired one of the most prominent anti-vaxx groups, Children's Health Defense (CHD), a multi-million dollar superspreader of online anti-vaccine misinformation.

The *Washington Post* article, headed "Global health experts sound alarm over RFK Jr., citing Samoa outbreak," delivered a blunt warning about the dangers Kennedy poses, pointing to his interference in the Pacific Island nation of Samoa prior to a devastating 2019 measles epidemic.

Aiono Dr. Alec Ekeroma, director general of Samoa's Health Ministry, told the *Post* that Kennedy will use his position to empower the global anti-vaccine movement and may advocate for reduced funding for international agencies. He warned that Kennedy "will be directly responsible for killing thousands of children around the world by allowing preventable infectious diseases to run rampant."

Samoa's disastrous measles epidemic was first declared by the government of Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi in October 2019, after cases spread from a wave of infections in New Zealand. The disease exploded in Samoa: in a population of 200,000, more than 5,700 were

infected and 83 died, almost all of them young children. Hospitals were overrun and a state of emergency declared. In December, police were deployed to impose a nationwide quarantine as the epidemic ran out of control.

A massive vaccination campaign was belatedly launched but the government faced mounting public anger over its failure to prevent what was an entirely foreseeable and preventable outbreak. Relatives of children who died maintained the authorities must have known that people were at grave risk of infection but had failed to act.

Tuilaepa blamed the victims' "mindset," telling the media the people had a "lackadaisical attitude." In fact, Samoa was warned repeatedly to improve measles vaccination rates several months before the arrival of the epidemic. According to Radio NZ, in March 2019 the World Health Organisation and UNICEF had identified Samoa's extremely low vaccination rates as a key risk amid the global resurgence of measles.

Samoa's low immunisation levels were exacerbated by a medical mishap in July 2018 that killed two babies, prompting widespread distrust in vaccinations. Two nurses were prosecuted and jailed for negligent manslaughter after mistakenly diluting the powdered vaccine with a dose of anaesthetic instead of water.

Following the deaths, the country's vaccine program was placed on hold, while vaccine opponents, including Kennedy's CHD, spread misinformation, exploiting the deaths to question the safety of vaccines. The vaccination rate for newborn children plummeted from the 60-to-70 percent range to just 31 percent in the year prior to the outbreak.

In this environment Kennedy turned up in Samoa, four months before the measles outbreak, agitating against vaccinations. He met with anti-vaccine advocates, publicly supported them and lending credibility to those responsible for vaccine hesitation among Samoans. Kennedy and his wife, actress Cheryl Hines, were treated like royalty, travelling in a government vehicle, meeting officials and joining Tuilaepa among other "distinguished guests" at the

country's 57th Independence Celebration.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), while not naming names, declared that anti-vaccine groups had been stoking fears with a social media campaign, noting that "this is now being measured in the lives of children who have died in the course of this outbreak." Kate O'Brien, director of the WHO immunisation department, told the *Guardian* that misinformation about vaccines "had a very remarkable impact on the immunisation program" in Samoa.

According to *Mother Jones*, last July 2 Kennedy acknowledged his trip had been arranged by a prominent Samoan anti-vaxxer, coconut farmer Edwin Tamasese, and paid for by CHD. Its purpose, he claimed, was to discuss with officials "the introduction of a medical informatics system that would allow Samoa's health officials to assess, in real time, the efficacy and safety of every medical intervention or drug on overall health." This would include questioning the value of vaccinations.

Tamasese was subsequently arrested and charged with incitement against a government order. He had described the vaccination program as "the greatest crime against our people" and absurdly claimed vitamin C could cure infected children. Samoa's Communications Minister Afamasaga Rico Tupai told TVNZ: "The anti-vaxxers unfortunately have been slowing us down." On a CHD blog post, Kennedy later called Tamasese a "medical freedom hero" and dismissed the outbreak as "mild."

While in Samoa, Kennedy met with Taylor Winterstein, a prominent Samoan-Australian "influencer." On Instagram, Winterstein wrote: "I am deeply honoured to have been in the presence of a man I believe is, can and will change the course of history." In a cynical pitch to the deeply religious Samoan community, she declared Kennedy's visit was "divinely timed" and added hashtags used by anti-vaxxers.

As the death toll rapidly escalated, the anti-vax advocates doubled down on lies about the cause and promoted bogus "cures." Kennedy wrote to the Samoan government, calling on the health ministry to "determine, scientifically, if the outbreak was caused by inadequate vaccine coverage or alternatively, by a defective vaccine."

The anti-vaxx campaign also spread across the Pacific and into New Zealand where the outbreak originated. Thousands of people in the southwestern Pacific, where poverty and poor health are endemic, contracted the disease. New Zealand's outbreak was the worst in 20 years, with 2,014 notified cases between January and November. Of these, over two-thirds were in South Auckland, home to large Pacific Island populations.

Helen Petousis-Harris, a New Zealand vaccinologist, told the Associated Press in October 2023 that the crisis of low vaccination rates and scepticism in Samoa had created an

environment that was "ripe for the picking for someone like RFK to come in and assist with the promotion of those views." Local and regional anti-vaccine activists took their cues from Kennedy who, she said, "sits at the top of the food chain as a disinformation source." The anti-vax operators had "amplified the fear and mistrust, which resulted in the amplification of the epidemic and an increased number of children dying."

Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Lawrence O. Gostin, a leading expert in public health law at Georgetown Law, declared he had "never seen a darker day for global health than after the election of President Trump." Citing the incoming administration's hostility to science as well as scepticism of "vitally important" public health interventions and antipathy toward international agencies such as the WHO, "there's going to be a huge assault on international cooperation in global health," he said.

Gostin also warned that if countries "can no longer trust that our scientists are experienced and wise, and that there's [not] politics intertwined with science, there'll be no gold standard to look toward." Petousis-Harris added that small countries such as New Zealand relied on "big and powerful" US regulatory agencies. "No way could we go through the same process independently for the same medicine. I don't think people realize how vital that is," she explained.

Kennedy's nomination is proceeding unchallenged, even as dangerous new strains of COVID-19 are circulating globally, along with a highly infectious bird flu. His elevation to head the HHS will, the WSWS has warned, represent "a massive social retrogression, akin to sending the United States—the world's richest capitalist country—back to the Middle Ages." To that can be added, not only the US but the entire world.



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