

After child dies in Texas measles outbreak, Kennedy promotes “vaccine choice” and pseudoscience

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The ongoing measles outbreak in West Texas, which began in January, has become the largest in the state in over 30 years. With 146 confirmed cases across nine counties—including 20 hospitalizations and one child’s death—this crisis underscores the tragic consequences of the sustained anti-vaccine movement, accelerated by COVID-19 pandemic politics and the return of the fascist Donald Trump to the White House.

More than a month into the health crisis, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has yet to issue any substantive guidance. This failure has created a public embarrassment for the Trump administration and incoming Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a key figure spreading public health disinformation and anti-vaccine poison for over a decade.

Last Wednesday, when questioned about the first measles-related child death in the US in over a decade, Kennedy callously dismissed the fatality as “not unusual.” He falsely claimed that hospitalized children were under quarantine rather than acknowledging their infections’ severity. These remarks drew sharp criticism on social media, intensifying demands for decisive action.

RFK Jr. attempted damage control with a feigned apology on Elon Musk’s platform X (formerly Twitter), now a hub for anti-science misinformation. He wrote, “My heart goes out to the families impacted by the current measles outbreak in TX,” while stating that HHS would send 2,000 vaccines to Texas and falsely claiming that ending the outbreak “is a top priority.”

His response proved confusing and defensive. Why would HHS need to send 2,000 MMR vaccine doses to Texas when local authorities already have sufficient stockpiles? The crisis stems not from supply shortages but from vaccine hesitancy fueled above all by Kennedy himself. The affected region has Texas’ third-highest rate

of public-school conscientious exemptions (13.6 percent)—a figure believed higher among private-school and homeschooled children.

Epidemiologist Katelyn Jetelina notes in her newsletter:

West Texas has pockets of alarmingly low MMR vaccination rates. In the area where this outbreak began, one in five children is unvaccinated. Measles spreads like wildfire in unprotected communities—it’s the most contagious virus on earth. On average, one infected person will spread it to 12–18 unvaccinated people.

By contrast, measles vaccines boast a half-century safety record with 97 percent effectiveness after two doses. Breakthrough infections in vaccinated individuals typically cause milder illness.

RFK Jr.’s emphasis on HHS lab support overlooks Texas’ existing technological capabilities. What is really lacking are robust contact-tracing protocols and authority to temporarily close schools and other places where large numbers of people congregate, while verifying community vaccination status. No concrete measures to rapidly halt transmission have been proposed by Kennedy or HHS.

Kennedy’s post also promotes “physician-administered outpatient vitamin A,” pandering to alternative medicine conspiracists who distort medical evidence. While vitamin A supplements help hospitalized measles patients in resource-poor countries where deficiencies worsen outcomes, they are rarely needed in the US due to adequate dietary intake.

Dr. Bernard Camins, medical director for infection

prevention at the Mount Sinai Health System in New York, told *NBC News*:

I don't think that it's necessarily dangerous to give it, especially if you give it the right dose and if used in the right setting. It's just something doctors will prescribe if someone comes down with measles to help survive. [But] what I'm really worried about is what happened with COVID when some people were just taking anti-parasitic agents or whatever, instead of the vaccine.

After failing to advocate for vaccinations, RFK Jr. doubled down with an unhinged opinion piece published Sunday in *Fox News*, admitting briefly that “MMR vaccine is crucial to avoiding potentially deadly disease.”

However, the piece exposes persistent vaccine skepticism masked by technical distortions. For example, he describes measles transmission through “direct contact with infectious droplets” while avoiding the medically accepted term “airborne”—a deliberate evasion mirroring COVID-era disputes between aerosol experts and the World Health Organization (WHO). This semantic gamesmanship is not pedantry; it's a dangerous minimization of risks from a health official, particularly after US COVID deaths have now surpassed 1.4 million and global fatalities stand at roughly 30 million.

Even RFK Jr.'s tepid endorsement of vaccines, which he says merely “contribute to community immunity,” collapses under his libertarian framing. By asserting vaccination as a “personal” decision requiring parental consultation, he ignores public health's foundational principle: individual choices cannot override community safety. This tension was settled legally in the 1905 Supreme Court case *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, which upheld state mandates during smallpox outbreaks.

Most egregiously, Kennedy's op-ed revives long-debunked claims, writing:

Tens of thousands died with, or of, measles annually in 19th Century America. By 1960—before the vaccine's introduction—improvements in sanitation and nutrition had eliminated 98 percent of measles deaths. Good nutrition remains a best defense

against most chronic and infectious illnesses. Vitamins A, C, and D, and foods rich in vitamins B12, C, and E should be part of a balanced diet.

This revisionism ignores the scientific fact that measles vaccines alone have prevented 94 million deaths since 1974. While nutrition matters, vaccines remain irreplaceable. They have added decades to global life expectancy, ranking among humanity's greatest life-extending innovations.

RFK Jr., having grown up in the pre-vaccine era, likely contracted measles himself as a child. Anyone reaching adulthood in the 1960s-70s witnessed the virus's toll firsthand. Before the 1963 vaccine, nearly all American children contracted measles by age 15. Annual cases averaged 3-4 million, hospitalizing 50,000 children. Roughly 1,000 suffered permanent brain damage from measles-induced encephalitis, while 400-500 died yearly.

Vaccines transformed this trajectory. Measles cases plummeted 95 percent by the early 1970s following MMR vaccine adoption. By 2000, the CDC declared measles eliminated in the US due to over 90 percent vaccination rates. But these gains have eroded over the past decade—a direct consequence of anti-vaccine activism and politicized attacks on public health infrastructure.

The anti-vaccine movement's ascent into mainstream politics reflects broader societal fractures. Once relegated to the fringe, RFK Jr. now oversees US health policy. His *Fox News* op-ed exemplifies this dangerous shift: pseudoscientific rhetoric disguised as governance threatens to undo a century of medical advancement, endangering both American lives and public health globally.



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