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Doctors opposing RFK Jr. rally in the lead-up to his confirmation

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By Will Stone



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. spoke during a hearing with the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government on Capitol Hill on July 20, 2023 in Washington, DC.

Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will appear before senators this week as he tries to secure his bid to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

President Trump's controversial pick — an environmental lawyer descended from a political dynasty who spent years leading a prominent anti-vaccine advocacy group — has emerged as one of the most recognizable figures in the new administration's proposed cabinet.

The prospect of his confirmation has resulted in opposition from many people in the medical field, who cite his extensive history of promoting inaccurate claims on vaccines, infectious diseases and other areas of medical science. The Senate hearings before two separate committees are slated for Wednesday and Thursday.



SHOTS - HEALTH NEWS

RFK Jr. plans to keep a financial stake in lawsuits against the drugmaker Merck

Nobel laureates have written that Kennedy would put the nation's health in jeopardy. The American Public Health Association, representing 25,000 professionals in that field, has come out against his nomination, based on his "consistent disregard for scientific evidence." And recently thousands of physicians and others in health care have signed onto letters echoing these concerns.

"All we need is a handful of senators," says Dr. Rob Davidson, executive director of Committee to Protect Health Care, a progressive advocacy group that reports gathering more than 18,000 signatures from physicians (though the list hasn't been made public). "They should look at his record and it will absolutely confirm that he is a danger."

As health secretary, Kennedy would wield enormous influence — overseeing agencies that steer public health, biomedical research, pharmaceuticals, health coverage for more than 160 million people, and other essential functions for the country's health care.

Supporters have embraced his pledge to disrupt the medical establishment, overhaul federal health agencies and research priorities, and reverse the "chronic disease epidemic."

Kennedy does face "a lot of organized opposition," says Jay Richards, a senior research fellow at the right-leaning Heritage Foundation, who views that as further evidence of industry efforts to resist his agenda to tackle the "corrupting

influences of Big Pharma, Big Food and Big government."

Backers of Kennedy have launched their own efforts to signal support — one such letter says it has gathered more than 5,000 signatures from physicians, scientists and others in academia (the full list is not public).

When reached for comment over the phone, a spokesperson said Kennedy had met with over 60 senators and is "prepared and excited."



POLITICS

RFK Jr. faces a complicated confirmation with some opposition on both sides of the aisle

In his alliance with Trump, Kennedy has played up his promise to address chronic diseases, branded under the slogan "Make America Healthy Again."

While it's a broadly appealing message, Kennedy has ascended to this point — not in spite of his past record on vaccines and questioning of the scientific consensus — but because of that, argues Dr. Jeffrey Flier, former dean of Harvard Medical School and an endocrinologist who researches obesity and diabetes.

"Anyone could stand up and say, 'We have a lot of chronic diseases. We need to look at it,'" Flier says, "The idea that he represents some new insight into the importance of that area and how we should be thinking about it is ludicrous."

Ross Brownson notes there are many "well-qualified middle to right-leaning experts" who could lead HHS, without the same troubling track record as Kennedy.

"He would not be my choice," says Brownson, an epidemiologist and expert in chronic disease prevention at Washington University in St. Louis. "Whether the public health world can affect that is a political question."

Vaccine record to face scrutiny

And Dr. Brett Giroir, former assistant secretary for health under the first Trump administration, says Kennedy's path to confirmation — and the upcoming hearings — may hinge on whether senators believe that he has "moderated" his views on vaccines.

"Vaccination is one of the cornerstones of public health," says Giroir, who's now CEO of Altesa BioSciences, "His reliance on pseudoscience or quasi-science to form his opinions needs to be changed."

Kennedy has repeatedly brought up the debunked link between vaccines and autism and other misleading claims about their safety. In a 2023 podcast interview, he stated "there's no vaccine that is safe and effective." And about five months into the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, he petitioned the federal government to revoke the authorizations for the shots.

Vaccines are considered some of the most studied medical interventions in the world and are estimated to have averted more than 150 million deaths over the last 50 years, according to a recent analysis in *the Lancet*.

For his part, Kennedy denies spreading misinformation, though his criticism of vaccines is well known.



UNTANGLING DISINFORMATION

Inside RFK Jr.'s nonprofit's legal battles over vaccines and public health

During an NPR interview in November, Kennedy said his priority is to study vaccine safety and that he will not take vaccines away from anybody. But Giroir says that alone isn't sufficient because there's a lot the HHS secretary could do to "negatively impact vaccines" short of pulling them from the market.

For instance, as HHS secretary Kennedy could remove shots from the immunization schedule adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, change who sits on the advisory committee that makes recommendations and selectively release data that doesn't represent overall vaccine safety.

Giroir says Kennedy's confirmation has some "potential upsides" if he commits to following the scientific process and supporting immunization.

But Dr. Paul Offit, who has followed Kennedy's activism for years, disagrees vehemently, saying he "has little doubt" Kennedy will take steps to disrupt vaccine programs were he to be confirmed.

"No matter how much data you show him, he refuses to believe it," says Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, "He's an anti-vaccine zealot."

Physicians organize as others remain silent

Despite the outpouring of opposition to Kennedy on social media and in op-eds, some of the most prominent physician organizations have refrained from taking a public stance one way or the other on Kennedy's confirmation, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association.

During the first Trump administration, the AMA endorsed Trump's then-pick to lead HHS — an orthopedic surgeon who later resigned after an ethics scandal. The group did not respond to NPR's request for comment on why it hasn't yet weighed in on Kennedy.

"It's politics and they'll have to answer to that," says Davidson with Protect Health Care, "I think it's wrong."

Davidson's group has tried to ramp up pressure on Republican senators in states like Maine and North Carolina who may be swayed to oppose Trump's picks, and discourage Democrats who may side with him.

Some Republicans including Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky have signaled concern over Kennedy's views on vaccines. Separately, a group founded by former Vice President Mike Pence has taken aim at Kennedy for his views on abortion, psychedelics and his involvement in spreading misinformation about the measles vaccine ahead of a deadly outbreak in Samoa.

Kennedy enjoys support from a cadre of high-profile physicians and wellness influencers on social media who tend to focus on diet, lifestyle and alternative medical treatments, such as Dr. Mark Hyman and Dr. Mehmet Oz, who — if confirmed — would answer to Kennedy in his role as head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Simmering distrust in the wake of the pandemic — and, in some cases, opposition to the COVID-19 vaccines — is another common theme among some doctors with large followings who are backing Kennedy.

Dr. Philip Ovadia, a cardiothoracic surgeon based in Florida, says the attention to chronic diseases and nutrition is a big part of Kennedy's draw for him.

"All too often the attitude in medicine is that pharmaceuticals are the solutions to all our problems. The reality is that diet and lifestyle should be the first approach to most problems," says Ovadia, who runs a telemedicine practice.

Ovadia says he doesn't agree with all of Kennedy's views, but adds they are oftentimes "misrepresented" to seem more extreme, including his stance on vaccines.

"He just wants more transparency around that data, first of all, and then better data. And then we see where the chips fall. The things that have good data, yes, those should be kept. The ones that don't, we need to have a good conversation about that," he says, which could result in "pulling them off the market," or "adjusting where they are in the [vaccine] schedules."

"The medical community's in a tough situation here," says Dr. Jerome Adams, an anesthesiologist who was the U.S. Surgeon General during the first Trump administration and is now at Purdue University.

While Kennedy is clearly "riding a wave of mistrust," Adams says physicians must be careful not to seem like they're "wagging their finger" at people who may have legitimate reasons to be distrustful — and, at the same time, continue sharing the facts on vaccines.

"Many of us want to embrace the idea of focusing on nutrition and chronic diseases, but it cannot come at the expense of increasing vaccine hesitancy and decreasing childhood vaccination rates."

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