

Kennedy Confirmed as Health Secretary

Vaccine critic will seek to fight obesity and chronic disease while implementing administration's cost cuts

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WASHINGTON—The Senate confirmed Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Health and Human Services secretary on Thursday, putting a longtime critic of vaccines and the medical establishment in charge of the nation's vast and powerful health apparatus.

Every Democrat voted against Kennedy on Thursday, while Sen. Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), a polio survivor who had criticized the nominee's questioning of vaccines, was the lone Republican "no" vote.

Now, following the 52-to-48 vote and his subsequent swearing-in at the White House's Oval Office, Kennedy is in position to apply his unconventional views to [U.S. health policy](#).

On vaccines, he could create a new panel to review their safety, appoint allies to the federal panel that oversees vaccine recommendations and even expand the vaccines or injuries covered by a federal program compensating victims.

Speaking in a Fox News interview with Laura Ingraham on Thursday following his confirmation, Kennedy said: "I'm not going to take away anybody's vaccine. If people are happy with their vaccines, they ought to be able to get them. What we're going to do is give people good science. We don't have good safety studies on almost any of the vaccines."

Kennedy is also expected to pursue measures that fight obesity by eliminating certain chemicals from food, step up research on chronic disease and implement other elements of his "Make America Healthy Again" agenda.

Kennedy was sworn in by Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, surrounded by supporters including his wife, actor Cheryl Hines, Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) and TV personality Phil McGraw.

President Trump on Thursday signed an executive order creating a "MAHA commission," chaired by Kennedy, tasked with coming up with a strategy within 180 days to improve children's health.

Kennedy will also have to juggle other imperatives as secretary. He will likely face pressure from antiabortion advocates to dial back access to abortions in

emergency rooms and crack down on shipments of pills that women can take in their homes to terminate pregnancies.

Kennedy, a backer of abortion rights, has said that he would follow the Trump administration's lead on abortion policy.

He will also have to follow the administration's lead on remaking the federal health bureaucracy. The White House and [Elon Musk's](#) Department of Government Efficiency are already taking

And Republicans are eyeing cuts to the Medicaid health insurance program for people with low incomes.

Balancing demands from the administration and other interests, while pursuing his priorities, will be a steep task. Adding to the challenge, he will ask the department's 80,000 employees to follow him after years criticizing them and their actions.

Kennedy, the namesake of a liberal icon and a former environmental lawyer, has described federal health agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration as broken and beholden to the interests of drug and food makers.

He has also suggested policies that run counter to years of practice, such as eliminating fluoride from drinking water, banning television drug ads and re-examining food dyes and other additives. He criticized Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and mask mandates.

President Trump and Kennedy supporters have praised him as a disrupter willing to fight entrenched interests on behalf of parents and children.

"Mr. Kennedy is committed to reorienting our approach to healthcare and restoring faith in our institutions," Sen. Mike Crapo (R., Idaho) said.

Yet the ascension of a prominent vaccine critic to HHS secretary has worried many doctors and medical researchers, while sending pharmaceutical executives in search of areas of common ground.

"It will be a disaster for public health," said Dr. Paul Offit, an infectious disease physician at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "He has fixed, immutable, science-resistant beliefs. This country will suffer under his leadership."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) described Kennedy shortly before the vote as a "wildly unqualified conspiracy theorist." Confirming Kennedy, Schumer said, "is dangerous. This is wrong, very wrong."

McConnell said polio vaccines have saved millions of lives and their proven value shouldn't be relitigated.

HHS "deserves a leader who is willing to acknowledge without qualification the efficacy of lifesaving vaccines and who can demonstrate an understanding of basic elements of the U.S. healthcare system," McConnell said.

Kennedy has blamed autism on vaccines, though many studies have found there isn't a link. He has said the Covid-19 vaccines were the deadliest ever made.

After it emerged he could hold a prominent health role in a Trump administration, Kennedy moderated his statements about the shots, saying he didn't want to take them away.

He told many senators during meetings that he isn't antivaccine but simply wants good data to support shots.

Sen. Bill Cassidy (R., La.), a medical doctor, said he agreed to vote for Kennedy in exchange for a commitment to keep current federal vaccine recommendations, among other pledges.

Likewise, Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine), long viewed as a potential "no" vote, said Kennedy promised to re-examine the Trump administration's move to cut overhead payments in National Institutes of Health grants. Collins opposes the cuts.

The commitments still leave room for Kennedy to pursue his vaccine positions. Among many options, the department under his leadership could fund new studies on the safety of the vaccine schedule.