

RFK Jr.s' dangerous new power over America's public health

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This time on Code WACK!

What could Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s appointment as Secretary of Health and Human Services mean for the public health of everyday Americans, given his history of vaccine misinformation? With measles already on the rise and deadly, and the looming threat of future pandemics, ***how might his leadership shape the nation's response to infectious diseases?***

To find out, we spoke with **Dr. Abdul El-Sayed**—physician, epidemiologist, author, and county health commissioner. He is formerly the health director for the city of Detroit. As the host of the award-winning [America Dissected](#) podcast, he breaks down the forces shaping public health for tens of thousands of listeners each week. *This is the first of two episodes with Dr. El-Sayed.*

SHOW NOTES

WE DISCUSS

How much power does RFK Jr. actually have as the head of the nation's top health agency?

"He has a lot of power. The Secretary of Health and Human Services is probably the most powerful public health position in the country and potentially even in the world considering the power of the United States government. Underneath HHS, you have a number of really critical agencies. So you have the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services that oversee Medicare and Medicaid. You've got the Food and Drug Administration that approves foods and keeps them safe, as well as new medications and devices. You've got the National Institutes of Health, which sets and delivers on the nation's biomedical research agenda, and you've got the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which are the nation's public health, public health agency, and direct control of these agencies is extremely powerful.

"Being able to set everything from decisions about what gets paid for under Medicare and Medicaid, to what gets studied by the NIH to what decisions around public health policy get made at the CDC to what approvals or how we do approvals for medications at the FDA.

"And then there's the platform, right? The fact that you are the Secretary for Health and Human Services in the United States of America. And so both from a cultural standpoint and then also from a direct policy standpoint, this is an extremely powerful position." – **Dr. Abdul El-Sayed**

Measles cases are rising globally, and we've seen recent deaths in the US after years of progress in eliminating the disease. RFK Jr. has suggested measles is associated with diet and that cod liver oil is an effective treatment. As a physician and epidemiologist, how do you respond?

"The number one most important thing that people need to understand is [that] the best single way to protect yourself from getting measles is to get the MMR vaccine. Now, cod liver oil, at best, may help with some of the symptoms, but it does not prevent measles.

"... Getting measles is a function of being exposed to the measles virus, not being malnourished. And then the last point here, ... [which is] so absurd ... that 'the best way to prevent getting measles is getting measles' is just, I mean, it ... strains credulity that this is an argument that people are making." – **Dr. Abdul El-Sayed**

What's ultimately at stake if RFK Jr. and HHS leadership does not fully support immunization efforts. What's the worst case scenario?

"Well, it could get really bad ... imagine a world where they fumble ... vaccine access. So even the people who want to take it can't get it. Like that. ... I haven't seen anything to indicate that they're going to go after vaccine access yet, but it is something that they could do, right? So that's the worst case scenario. *You want a vaccine, you can't get it.*

"But it's also just dwindling trust in vaccines, which work in part to protect you, but also to protect **us**. And I worry that the cat's out of the bag now on measles. Measles is the most contagious virus known to humankind. So to put in perspective, every one Covid case ... will lead to two other covid cases. Okay?

“For measles, every one measles case will lead to 18 new cases. So measles will exploit the cracks in our armor. It will find the people who are unvaccinated, it will spread where it can. And I worry that given how fast this is already happening, that that's already happening. So we are in for a world where diseases that otherwise had been kept under wraps because people made the smart choice and got vaccinated and vaccinated, their children are now spreading in ways that put us all at risk and in particular put our babies at risk.

“And ... to that point I was making earlier about living in a society where you care about other people, like if you can't care about any other people, like at least you should care about babies.” - ***Dr. Abdul El-Sayed***

Helpful Links

[America Dissected](#), *Crooked Media*

[How measles, whooping cough and worse could roar back on RFK Jr.'s watch](#), *NPR*

[How Does the Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\) Impact Health and Health Care?](#), *KFF*

[The perils of RFK Junior's anti-vaccine leadership for public health](#), *The Lancet*

Episode Transcript

Read the [episode transcript](#)

Guest Biography - Dr. Abdul El-Sayed

Dr. Abdul El-Sayed is a physician, epidemiologist, educator, and county health commissioner. Abdul hosts the award-winning “**America Dissected**” podcast, attracting tens of thousands of weekly listeners to go beyond the headlines to explore the intersection between health and society.

His three books include “**Healing Politics**,” calling for a politics of empathy to cure our epidemic of insecurity, and “**Medicare for All: A Citizen’s Guide**” with Dr. Micah Johnson.

His over 100 peer-reviewed publications have earned nearly 3,700 citations. He holds academic appointments at the intersection between public health, public policy, and politics at the University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, the FXB Center for Health & Human Rights at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Wayne State University, and American University.

He is formerly the health director for the city of Detroit, candidate for governor of Michigan in 2018, and commentator at CNN. He’s a proud member of the National Writers Union, AFT Locals 477 and 6244, SEIU Local 500, and the AAUP.

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