



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

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Welcome to Code WACK!, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, Brenda Gazzar.

(music)

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.

Welcome to Code WACK! Dr. El-Sayed.

Sayed: Excited to be here with you.

Q: So RFK Junior has been a famous critic of vaccines, whether childhood immunizations or vaccines against seasonal illnesses like COVID-19 and flu. So how much power does RFK Jr. actually have as the head of the nation's top health agency – and what are you most concerned about?

El-Sayed: Well, 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 [CMS] 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 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.

Q: Wow, so to confirm, the Health and Human Services or HHS oversees the CDC and the FDA?

El-Sayed: Yep. All of these agencies sit underneath HHS.

Okay. So now he's in control of all these agencies, essentially?

El-Sayed: Yep. Now each of them has their own titular head, but if you're the secretary, you're their boss. And so the approach that you're gonna take when it comes to questions of vaccines, for example, that is going to be echoed and we've seen that in confirmation hearings for people like Dr. Marty McCarey, who is the appointee for FDA or Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, who is the appointee at NIH.

Q: Wow. Okay. So speaking of vaccinations, 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. He's also said that when he was a kid, measles gave people lifetime protection against measles infection – and the vaccine doesn't do that. As a physician and epidemiologist, how do you respond?

El-Sayed: The number one most important thing that people need to understand is 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. The risk of getting measles is a function of being exposed to the measles virus, not being malnourished, and then the last point here, I just want to break down the logic here. 'cause It's so absurd on its own terms. The idea 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. Yes. 'If you don't want people to get measles, they should get measles.' You're like, 'what the, like, how does that make any sense?' Especially considering the fact that the reason you don't wanna get measles is because measles can kill you. And so, you know, I'm not as much worried about whether or not people are protected from measles when they're 35. I'm a lot more worried about whether or not they're protected from measles when they're five. Right. And the best way to do that is to get 'em vaccinated.

Okay. So in a recent interview, RFK Jr. issued a weak call for vaccinations, but said it was a personal choice. He also implied that injuries from measles vaccines were more common than known, which experts say contradicts plentiful research. Are you concerned about the impact his top HHS leadership will have on an American public's readiness to resolve the current measles epidemic or a possible future one?

El-Sayed: I am. You got to remember the history here. For a long time, RFK Jr. has been one of the principle exponents of this anti-vax conspiracy, and he brings that with him to this role. Now, I'm glad that he said that the MMR vaccine does prevent measles because it does and that's obvious and true and based in science. The worry I have is that given the context of all he said in the past, when you elevate these other potential approaches to trying to treat measles as if they're the same thing as getting an MMR vaccine, by definition, you're trying to give people an out from doing the thing that is the most important thing to protect themselves. So for example, if my young daughter said, I want to go outside in the middle of winter and I want to stay warm, what should I do? I could say, 'oh, there are two options here. You could rub your hands or you could wear a coat.' Right? Obviously one of them is way better than the other. Right. But I'm setting them up as if they are similar and could be interchanged and, and that's just not true.

The other point about a personal choice, yes, getting a measles vaccine is a personal choice. A really, really good personal choice to make if you are serious about protecting yourself from measles. So to say that it's a personal choice is an obvious thing. Nobody's chasing you with a syringe. That's not how this works. Right? But what we want is people to make that choice. And what seems to be the case is that RFK does not, and that's what I'm a little bit worried about. So when you say, 'oh, vaccines are really helpful, but they're a personal choice,' all that does in the mind of somebody is to say, okay, so why is he telling me that? Right? Like, taking showers is a really important personal hygiene approach, but it's a personal choice, right? Like, 'yes, of course it's a choice to take a shower, but yes, of course you should take showers like you just should because it's clean.'

So from a communication standpoint, it's either he doesn't know what he is doing because he's 100% unqualified for the job, or he knows exactly what he is doing. And, you know, in a time when we're watching measles spread in West Texas, that is directly putting people in harm's way.

Q: Got it. And so it sounds like you're suggesting that this is gonna erode public trust and vaccines even more. Is that right?

El-Sayed: I worry that it will, you know, but the reality of it is that vaccines have been a victim of their own success. Like people don't see much measles, they don't see much polio, they don't see many of the diseases that vaccines have made extremely rare. And so it's easy to walk around thinking that the biggest risk here is, is a risk of, of, you know, some harm that might come to you from the vaccine because you've never actually seen the harm that comes to you from the disease. Right? So, you know, at the end of the day, like I say this as a scientist and a physician, every medical intervention has the potential risk of a consequence. Now, when it comes to MMR, those risks are very, very, very low. But the reason we have a whole thing called medicine is because the risks of diseases are way higher.

And so, you know, if you want to make a smart decision, then you sit down and you say, what's the benefit and the risk of getting this intervention that can prevent the risk of this disease or getting this disease, and I think when you look at measles out there, it's pretty obvious that you're going to go with the MMR vaccine. So despite whatever he's doing, I actually think the fact that people are now coming to terms with the reality of measles, that it's spreading like wildfire in West Texas, has now hopped into two other states, has taken two lives, I think people are gonna think twice and they're going to say, 'yeah, it is a personal choice and I'm gonna make that choice because I wanna protect my kid.' And then the other part of this here that I want people to remember is that we live in a society where our choices have consequences for other people.

As much as people want to pretend like that's not the case, it is. We live among one another. You know, if I start swinging my fist wildly and it hits your face, my decision to swing my fist, right, had implications for your face let's not pretend like we are automata unto ourselves. And there are people in our society who can't get vaccinated, right? Namely, babies under the age of one. Their immune system is just not equipped for it. And so when we choose as a society, when we choose poorly and don't get our kids vaccinated, we are putting other people in harm's way.

Now people like RFK wanna tell you that that shouldn't matter to you. And I just don't wanna live in the kind of society where people don't consider what the

implications of their actions are for other people. I would rather live in a society where people think a little bit about what they're going to do and how it's going to impact me, and I think about what I'm gonna do and how it's gonna impact them. 'cause That's just like, you know, being a good neighbor and being a good friend, and like being a good member of society. And like, I don't know when that like, stop being cool, but like, I'd like to like it to be cool again because I wanna live in a place where people mind what happens to other people around them. I think it should just makes for a better country and a better world.

Q: Right? And that's why we don't allow people to drive drunk or why it's against the law to because they can kill themselves, but other people as well.

El-Sayed: Right? I mean this like pretend world where I'm like, I'm a mountain unto myself. It's just like, I don't know, like you, you need to go outside and touch grass or like go and walk around in a place where there are other people and I think you're, you're gonna start caring whether or not they do the things, things that are mindful of you. Right?

Q: So Dr. 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?

El-Sayed: Well, it could get really bad. You know, you could imagine a world where they fumble like vaccine access. So even the people who wanna take it can't get it. Like that. That is, that is a scenario that, you know, I haven't seen anything to indicate that they're gonna 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 outta the bag now on measles. Measles is the most contagious virus known to humankind so to put in perspective, every one Covid case, if you're among a community that is unvaccinated, 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 I don't know, 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.

Thank you Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, physician and host of the America Dissected podcast.

Stay tuned for next week when we continue our discussion about RFK Jr., vaccines and public health.

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