



How to Fight RFK Jr.'s Ambiguous Vaccine Agenda: Insights from Dr. Abdul El-Sayed

"If you could prevent them from getting polio, which put kids in [iron lungs](#) or took away their ability to walk, which by the way happened to a US president and a sitting US senator right now. Right. You would do that. And, and we, we seem to have forgotten that because the vaccines have been so effective." *Dr. Abdul El-Sayed*

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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 can government officials at all levels do to counteract the mixed messages **Robert Kennedy, Jr.**, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, has given about vaccine safety and efficacy? What can be done to highlight the cost of not vaccinating our children and to combat disinformation? To find out, we spoke with **Dr. Abdul El-Sayed**—physician, epidemiologist, author,

county health commissioner and former health director for the city of Detroit. As the host of the award-winning podcast America Dissected, he breaks down the forces shaping public health for tens of thousands of listeners each week. This is the second episode in a two-part series.

Q: Welcome back to Code WACK! Dr. El-Sayed. Last time on Code WACK! We talked about RFK Jr, who has a lot of power over the nation's public health as the new Secretary of Health and Human Services and who has given conflicting and even dangerous messages about the importance and safety of vaccines. If RFK Jr. were to push an anti-vaccine agenda, what could be done at the state or local level to counteract that?

El-Sayed: Well, the good news is that we have a federalized system that's been tough in some ways, but it's also been really important because local communities can act on their own to try and drive pro-vaccine messaging. The hard part about it though is that, you know, the federal government is a big microphone and it's not great to have different agencies saying different things, right. That's just bad. By definition, that increases the lack of clarity about the situation and amplifies the quote unquote "open questions," despite the fact that the science has been settled on this for a very long time.

The worry I have though, is that the federal government does have ways to try and compel state and local governments. There's funding that's at stake, and you could imagine, you know, they're already coming after things like DEI, but you could imagine them trying to condition funding on vaccine mandates at the school level, for example, which they've already done, by the way, in an executive order or, you know, a state's position on vaccine policy.

So there's a lot at risk here. And you know, I think good, fair-minded, scientifically minded people will be out there promoting the thing that is the scientifically backed thing to do to protect yourself. But, you know, the unfortunate reality of that is that there are a lot of folks who don't have the time and the space to be able to look into this. And when they hear conflicting messages, what tends to happen is people bias toward inaction. And in this case, it's biasing toward not taking a vaccine. And that's really worrying to me, right? Because, you know, it only really becomes so obvious when the worst already happens and the opportunity to fix it is gone.

Q: Right. So understanding that these mixed messages cause inaction. Are there strategies that can be employed by national or state health officials to counteract these narratives that Kennedy has promoted regarding vaccine safety and efficacy?

El-Sayed: Yeah, I think the most important thing is to get out there now and to pre-but a lot of these arguments, right? To be talking about what you're going to be hearing from some of these people and why it's not actually based, in fact the other thing, and look public health as a lot of work to do when it comes to messaging generally, is that we're not very good at telling stories. You know, too often we try and appeal to a perceived sense of expertise that people don't really care that much about. Right? When I'm asked in the community about, about vaccines, what I tell folks is 'like, look, I could tell you, you know, as a doctor and an epidemiologist, but really, lemme just tell you as a dad, like the day my kids turned one years old, I took them to get vaccinated.

Why? Because I know what these diseases do to people, and I also know how much I love my little girls, and I want them to be alive so long as I can hold them and care for them and feed them and love them and smell them, and all the things that you want to do with your children. And I don't want a disease to take that away from me. So, you know, as a dad, I got my kids vaccinated, and as a physician and epidemiologist, I can tell you all the numbers, but you know, like, you should ask me what I do and that's what I do. Right?'

And I think it's important for us to remember that when you're engaging people, you have to understand where they're coming from, where the fear is coming from, and you have to be willing to lead with a story. And I think too often we lead with these numbers and statistics and we create this whole wall between ourselves and other people that's filled with all kinds of letters behind our names. And that's not all that useful. I think people want to understand who you are as a person and why it matters to you.

Q: Got it. So the story that you tell is it that you got your kids vaccinated when they were turned one?

El-Sayed: Yeah, and I mean, the other story I can tell is my family comes from Egypt. I've seen what polio does to people, like people who had polio. And the fact that that does not happen here is a pretty miraculous thing. And it all comes down to vaccines. Right?

Or I tell the story of my own grandparents who were born and raised in this country, right? And how their parents lined them up for this vaccine that had only been available for weeks, right, just here in Ann Arbor when the Salk vaccine was first discovered for

polio. Why? Because they had all seen children in iron lungs and they didn't want their kids to be them. So again, it goes back to that question of the side effect of the vaccine or the side effect of the disease. Right? And we've forgotten the side effects of the disease because we don't see it because the vaccines work, right?

Q: *Did you say you saw them in iron lungs?*

El-Sayed: They'd seen them in iron lungs. Like my grandparents all had kids at their schools who spent like months in iron lungs because they got polio. And so their parents, as soon as the Salk vaccine was available, right, as soon as it was available, they lined their kids up to get it. Because if you could prevent them from getting polio, which put kids in iron lungs or took away their ability to walk, which by the way happened to a U.S. president and a sitting U.S. senator right now. Right. You would do that. And, and we, we seem to have forgotten that because the vaccines have been so effective.

Q: *So what exactly are iron lungs? I'm not familiar with that term.*

El-Sayed: One of the things that polio can do is it will paralyze you. And one of the things that can paralyze is the muscle that helps you breathe. And so back in the day when people would get polio, if they were unable to continue to breathe, they would have to be put in this huge machine, basically imagine this gigantic iron thing and all that you see popping out the front end is their face. And it would basically help them breathe. Oh, wow. And you'd have to spend months there because they lost their ability to do it on their own. Like that's an iron lung. Like that's a thing people had to do back in the day. And we don't have to do it anymore because we have a polio vaccine, which is miraculous and amazing. It saved a ton of lives.

Q: *Wow. That's incredible. What would you say to Americans who feel RFK Jr. is reflecting their own views that vaccines are ineffective or even dangerous?*

El-Sayed: 'I understand why you're scared. There's a lot of mis- and disinformation and you're just trying to do the best for your family. I would also though encourage you, right, to take a look or find folks who can help you get access to what these diseases look like when they start to spread.' Right. And I would also say that, you know, 'there are things that we can do to be healthier that are not also vaccines, right? There's not a vaccine for heart disease right. There's not a vaccine for many kinds of cancer. And so it's not mutually exclusive to say, I'm gonna live a holistically healthy lifestyle where I eat whole foods and I exercise regularly, and also I'm gonna make use of vaccines.'

And I think one of the things that they've done very effectively is to try and pretend like these two things are mutually exclusive, right? As somebody who lifts weights and runs and bikes and, you know, eats very unprocessed foods, I also get vaccinated because all of these things are valuable things, right? One will protect me from things like measles and covid and flu. And one will protect me from things like heart disease and strokes, and I wanna do them both, but not mutually exclusive.

Q: Go tit. So what message would you give to Americans who are worried about vaccine policies under RFK Jr. as the Secretary of the Health and Human Services?

El-Sayed: Your voice matters. This is your democracy and your government. Speak up.

Q: Yes, and what else would you like us to know, Dr. El-Sayed?

El-Sayed: I think we all forget that all of us have a platform. Even if your platform is the 10 people you see every day. And I think it's important for us to come to these conversations and have them, but to have them in a way that's empathic and that starts with listening. And I think sometimes we focus a lot on what powerful people like RFK Jr do, and we inadvertently rob ourselves of our own power. And so I want folks to remember that you too can be someone who speaks up against mis and disinformation and probably you're more powerful, right? Like, you know, when I talk about these things, people are like, 'yeah, yeah, yeah. You're one of those like public health people. Sure, sure, sure.'

But like, if you are somebody in your daily life who's like, 'I'm really concerned about the situation and I'm gonna make sure that people around me understand what I believe, and if they're hesitant about these things, I'm gonna have an empathic conversation that starts with listening to their fears and gets them to a place where they understand that I care a lot about what they're afraid of, but also care about them and believe in this thing,' I think all of us can do a lot of good. So I hope that folks will step into their own power and their own platform in a moment like this to embrace what we can all do to combat mis-and disinformation.

Thank you Dr. El-Sayed of the America Dissected podcast.

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