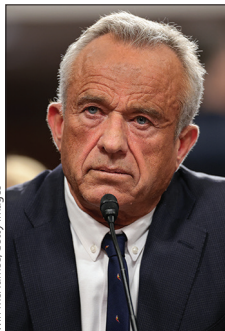




Robert F Kennedy Jr's promises

To secure his confirmation as Health and Human Services chief, Kennedy made commitments to undecided senators that are already being put to the test. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.



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To earn enough Senate votes for confirmation as Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Robert F Kennedy Jr made some surprising promises for someone aspiring to become the nation's top health official. He had to reassure a few sceptical Republican senators that he would not overturn years of accepted public health policies, medical practice, and scientific consensus. And yet, in just the short time since assuming his new post on Feb 13, Kennedy's actions—and inaction—appear to undermine those commitments as thousands of HHS employees are laid off under President Donald Trump's executive orders shrinking the size and cost of government.

The Senate voted 52 to 48, mostly along party lines, to confirm Kennedy. The only Republican joining the solidly Democratic opposition was the Republican Senate Majority Leader during the first Trump Administration, Mitch McConnell, a polio survivor.

HHS has a \$1.8 trillion budget, representing one-quarter of the US federal budget and more than 80 000 employees in the USA and around the world. It is home to 13 agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA); the National Institutes of Health (NIH); the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); the Indian Health Service (IHS); and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS), which provide Medicare, Medicaid, and Affordable Care Act health insurance to roughly half of the US population—more than 160 million children and adults.

Kennedy, a son of Senator Robert F Kennedy and nephew of President John F Kennedy, is an environmental lawyer with no formal medical or

scientific training, who has not previously held any elected or appointed government position. He has been a popular long-time anti-vaccine activist and has also crusaded against the ravages of ultra-processed foods and chronic diseases, particularly obesity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kennedy petitioned the FDA to rescind emergency approval of the COVID-19 vaccine. At his Senate nomination hearings, he declined to say unequivocally that vaccines do not cause autism. He has claimed that prevention and treatment of infectious diseases has received too much attention at the expense of research on chronic diseases. Such views raised doubts for several Republican senators, which Kennedy tried to assuage.

"Vaccines have saved millions of lives", Alaska Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski said in a statement. "I sought assurance that, as HHS Secretary, he would do nothing to make it difficult for people to take vaccines or discourage vaccination efforts. He has made numerous commitments to me and my colleagues, promising to work with Congress to ensure public access to information and to base vaccine recommendations on data-driven, evidence-based, and medically sound research. These commitments are important to me and, on balance, provide assurance for my vote."

Maine Republican Senator Susan Collins also supported Kennedy after he promised that he would not restrict access to the polio vaccine and that he would work to restore public confidence in vaccines. Kennedy also reassured Collins that he would not reduce research on infectious diseases and would support research to develop a Lyme disease vaccine. Collins also raised concerns about Trump's executive order restricting funds from

NIH that pay for the indirect costs of operating laboratories, purchasing and maintaining specialised equipment, and other research-related expenses. The order is expected to cut \$4 billion in funding. Kennedy reassured Collins "that as soon as he is confirmed, he will reexamine that order", Collins told Maine Public Radio. (As *The Lancet* went to press, a federal judge had put the order on hold.)

Collins said that another reason for her support was Kennedy's commitment to meet regularly with Louisiana Republican Senator Bill Cassidy, Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and a physician. Before entering politics, Cassidy practised medicine for 30 years, specialising in liver disease.

During Kennedy's nomination hearing, Cassidy questioned Kennedy's approach to addressing parents' concerns about vaccine safety. "I've approached it using the preponderance of evidence to reassure, and you have approached using selected evidence to cast doubt", Cassidy said. He asked if Kennedy, a man "who has spent decades criticising vaccines and who's financially vested in finding fault with vaccines, can he change his attitudes and approach now that he'll have the most important position influencing vaccine policy in the United States?"

After several private conversations with Kennedy, including on the day of the Senate vote, Cassidy got his answer—several remarkably detailed commitments ensuring that the two men "will have an unprecedentedly close collaborative working relationship if he is confirmed", Cassidy said on the Senate floor before casting his vote for Kennedy. They will meet or speak multiple times a month, and Cassidy will advise Kennedy on hiring decisions

at HHS. Cassidy or any subsequent committee chair will choose a member of any board or commission formed to review vaccine safety. Cassidy said that Kennedy “would work within the current vaccine approval and safety monitoring systems, and not establish parallel systems. If confirmed, he will maintain recommendations by the CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices without changes. CDC will not remove statements on their website pointing out that vaccines do not cause autism.”

However, Senate Republicans showed little concern about Kennedy’s trouble answering questions about Medicare and Medicaid. During the hearing, he said that premiums paid by Medicaid beneficiaries were too high, even though Medicaid does not charge premiums. When Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent who votes with Democrats, asked Kennedy if he supported congressional proposals to cut funding for Medicaid, which covers 72 million people with low incomes, Kennedy said he was not aware of those potential cuts. Asked what is covered under Part A of Medicare—the health insurance programme for 67 million older or disabled adults—Kennedy told New Hampshire Democrat Maggie Hassan that it pays for patients’ doctor visits, whereas it covers inpatient hospital, nursing home, and hospice care. She also corrected Kennedy’s statement that Medicaid is fully funded by the federal government, telling him that states pay part of the costs.

Within days after assuming his new position, Kennedy seemed reluctant to intervene when Trump’s orders appeared to be inconsistent with his commitments to the senators. As *The Lancet* went to press, Kennedy had not intervened to stop Trump’s executive order reducing NIH funds for indirect research costs. He also did not rescind the CDC cancellation of a campaign promoting the benefits of influenza vaccination and did not reverse a decision by the CDC to postpone the Feb 26–28 meeting of its Advisory Committee on Vaccination Practices,

a group of independent experts who evaluate studies on vaccines and make recommendations about their use. Under the Affordable Care Act, health insurers are required to cover the cost of vaccines that the committee recommends.

It was the first time the meeting has been postponed during the 40 years that William Schaffner, Professor of Preventative Medicine and Infectious Diseases at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center (Nashville, TN, USA), has been associated with the committee. After serving on the committee from 1982 to 1986, he has since been a liaison representative working as a consultant to the committee. “Every ACIP meeting is a model of transparency where anyone can tune in and watch it in real time, and there is an opportunity to offer comments”, he said.

“Delaying this meeting is a deeply troubling move that raises serious questions about whether the administration is committed to protecting access to vaccines”, said Connecticut Representative Rosa DeLauro, the senior Democrat on the powerful House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations.

Kennedy was also silent on the Trump Administration’s plan to dismantle the CDC disease detective group known as the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS). Initially, about 50 EIS officers were supposed to be laid off, the Associated Press reported. But a CDC spokesperson told *The Lancet* in a Feb 21 email: “To date, all of the officers in CDC’s EIS remain in their positions.” He said there are 135 such positions.

“This is the premier training programme in the world for field epidemiology”, said Schaffner, who participated in the programme early in his career. It offers a unique opportunity to examine contaminated produce where it was grown, or to go into hospitals when there is an infectious disease outbreak. EIS officers learn to collaborate with local health departments, medical centres, and members of the public.

So far, Kennedy has not reversed the staff and funding cuts at HHS that may have prompted the resignations of several senior officials. As *The Lancet* went to press, two of the NIH’s five deputies had retired: Lawrence Tabak, Principal Deputy Director at NIH, and Michael Lauer, Deputy Director for Extramural Research. Jim Jones, Deputy Commissioner for Human Foods at the FDA, resigned on Feb 17 after 89 FDA food safety workers were fired. So far, at least 700 FDA staff have been dismissed, although STAT News reported that some were rehired a week later. The FDA, as well as the NIH and CMS, did not respond to *The Lancet*’s questions about layoffs and dismissals.

“I was looking forward to working to pursue the Department’s agenda of improving the health of Americans by reducing diet-related chronic disease and risks from chemicals in food”, Jones wrote in a letter to the FDA acting commissioner, according to *The Washington Post*. “It has been increasingly clear that with the Trump Administration’s disdain for the very people necessary to implement your agenda, however, it would have been fruitless for me to continue in this role.”

A notable exception to Kennedy’s support for the Trump Administration’s HHS cuts came after members of Congress and Native Indian advocacy groups strongly objected to the decision to lay off 950 health-care workers at the IHS. Kennedy had promised Senator Murkowski and other elected officials that he would protect the IHS. Only a few hours after the Office of Personnel Management announced the layoffs, Kennedy rescinded the decision, acknowledging in a statement that “Indians suffer the highest level of chronic disease of any demographic”. He promised: “IHS will be a priority over the next 4 years. President Trump wants me to end the chronic disease epidemic beginning in Indian country.”

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