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How RFK Jr helped to cause a health crisis in Samoa

Dozens of children died of measles on the Pacific island after Robert F Kennedy — now Trump's pick to be US health secretary — promoted antivax claims there



Robert F Kennedy Jr's influence in Samoa will do nothing to quiet the concerns of senators worried about confirming him as health secretary

[Samuel Lovett](#), New York

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t the peak of Samoa's deadly measles outbreak, as babies perished in their dozens, one of Leilani Jackson's biggest

A concerns was keeping her loved ones off social media.

Platforms including Facebook had become a hotbed of propaganda, with posts claiming the deaths were caused by vaccination. Some urged people to rely on papaya leaf extract to stay healthy. One antivaxer compared inoculation efforts to Nazi Germany.

“I wanted to make sure my friends and family weren’t seeing and sharing those messages,” said Jackson, 49, who worked as a nurse at the time in Apia, Samoa’s capital.

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Leaflets urging Samoans to vaccinate their children in 2019. Health officials were battling a tide of disinformation online

JACK TAYLOR/ALAMY

One of the many voices fuelling this disinformation was the man selected to be the next health secretary of the United States, [Robert F Kennedy Jr.](#) “He amplified the antivaxers,” she said.

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Kennedy, a long-term vaccine sceptic, has a lengthy record of disseminating bad science and questioning established public health policies.

Over the years the nephew of the assassinated president John F Kennedy has accused Bill Gates of hijacking the climate crisis, questioned the 2004 US presidential election, [suggested Covid spared Jewish people](#), and argued that HIV does not cause Aids. It was recently reported that a lawyer advising him had petitioned the US Food and Drug Administration to revoke approval for a polio vaccine.

- [The forgotten Americans beguiled by RFK Jr's healthcare conspiracies](#)

But it is Kennedy's involvement in Samoa's measles outbreak of 2019 that casts the darkest shadow — and points to what may lie ahead for the American public should he be confirmed as [Donald Trump's](#) health secretary.



Kennedy with Trump in Arizona in August last year, on the day he announced he was dropping out of the presidential race

EVAN VUCCI/AP

Kennedy's influence in Samoa took hold a year before the epidemic. In July 2018 two babies died after receiving improperly prepared vaccines, the result of human error. These deaths were soon picked up by antivax groups, including Kennedy's Children's Health Defence organisation, and used to question the safety of the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) jab.

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This disinformation, coupled with the temporary suspension of the country's immunisation programme, [drove down coverage rates](#). In 2018 only 31 per cent of children under five were vaccinated, a fall from 60-70 per cent in previous years.

The following summer Kennedy visited Samoa in a trip arranged by a local antivax activist and paid for by Children's Health Defence. During the visit Kennedy challenged one health official on the safety of MMR vaccine and discussed vaccination "a limited amount" with the prime minister, [according to The Guardian](#).

Dr Take Naseri, Samoa's director-general of health, said: "He told me he thinks the data is not solid."

During the epidemic, which killed 83 people and infected thousands, Kennedy and his acolytes spread false claims about its origins.

In a four-page letter to the prime minister he said the vaccine might be inadvertently spreading the virus in children and theorised about whether it had provoked "the evolution of more virulent measles strains".

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The outbreak was catastrophic. So many young children died, most of them under five, that New Zealand sent dozens of infant-sized coffins to Samoa. Foreign doctors were flown in to support overwhelmed hospitals. A lockdown was briefly ordered as schools closed and unvaccinated families marked their houses with red flags.



Red flags outside homes in Apia, indicating that the residents had not been vaccinated

CHIKARA YOSHIDA/GETTY IMAGES



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To this day Jackson does not know why Kennedy was invited to Samoa. His trip was never really publicised, she said.

But in her view there is no doubt of the impact. Jackson saw it on a almost daily basis when she visited overrun hospitals and co-ordinated the island's vaccination programme, which

involved working out how to reach the most inaccessible and poorest villages.

“There was a scarcity of resources, so we had a lot of challenges,” she said. “You were running against time to save the next person.”

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Kennedy insists he bears no responsibility for what happened. “I had nothing to do with people not vaccinating in Samoa. I never told anybody not to vaccinate,” he said last year.

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Josh Green, who vaccinated hundreds of people during the outbreak, and now serves as the governor of Hawaii, sees it differently. “RFK was absolutely responsible for destroying trust in vaccines in Samoa,” he said.

Volunteers and aid workers are assigned to villages at Samoa's national hospital in Apia

CHIKARA YOSHIDA/GETTY IMAGES

Kennedy first embraced the antivax movement in 2005 when he wrote an article in Rolling Stone magazine called “Deadly immunity”. In it, he claimed that mercury-based preservatives in vaccines had caused a rise in neurological disorders such as autism in children.

“I was drawn into the controversy only reluctantly,” he wrote, having spent years as an environmental lawyer investigating mercury toxicity and meeting mothers of autistic children “who were absolutely convinced that their kids had been injured by vaccines”.

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The response was scathing. There was no factual basis to his theory, scientists said, as one detail after another within the article was pulled apart — from incorrect attributions to a misrepresentation of how many vaccine injections children had received in the Eighties.

More than five hundred words' worth of corrections were appended to the piece before it was later withdrawn. One of the editors responsible for the article's publication admitted last year that it was "the worst mistake of my career".

But this backlash did not deter Kennedy. He has remained committed to the lie that vaccines cause autism — even though mercury was removed from or reduced in childhood jabs about two decades ago, while autism diagnoses have continued to rise.

- [Trump: We will examine connection between vaccines and autism](#)

Last year at a conference in Indianapolis he criticised a two-page document from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which, citing nine studies, debunked the vaccine-autism conspiracy theory. "They are all epidemiological studies, which are the easiest studies to fix," he said.

At the same event Kennedy falsely said that [Covid vaccines](#) had killed more people than they saved and discussed other conspiracies, ranging from Cold War cover-ups to suspected government collusions with the pharmaceutical industry.

"He's been peddling these lies for decades," said Lawrence Gostin, a lawyer in global health at Georgetown University. "He's a terrifying [pick for health secretary](#) because he lacks the basic minimum requirement, which is fidelity to science and truth."

- [Who is RFK Jr? Vaccine sceptic who'll be in charge of America's health](#)

Demonstrators protest against Kennedy's nomination outside Children's Hospital Los Angeles this week

FREDERIC J BROWN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Central to Kennedy's antivax agenda is the non-profit organisation he chaired until recently, the Children's Health Defence.

Since its founding in 2007 the group has staged public rallies, produced documentaries and launched campaigns and lawsuits targeting vaccination. It has attacked other public health policies, too, including the [fluoridation of water](#), paracetamol and pesticides.

"Our mission is ending childhood health epidemics by eliminating toxic exposure," its website reads.

Instagram and Facebook became two of its main disinformation forums. At one point Children's Health Defence had 300,000 followers on the platforms. In 2019 it was one of the big buyers of antivax Facebook adverts.

In 2022 the group's Meta accounts were terminated but the organisation has moved into new territory to disseminate its propaganda, including the newsletter app Substack, and Rumble, where content moderation can be more lax. During the pandemic its revenues doubled.

Kennedy stepped away from Children's Health Defence last year to run for the White House but his nomination to be health secretary has delighted the organisation.

"Game on. We are really there," Mary Holland, its president, said in a podcast last month. "And it's not going to be easy ... but look at how far we've come."

Efforts are under way to secure Kennedy's selection. This week he visited Capitol Hill to reassure anxious senators concerned by his past, and he has told the public that "we're not going to take vaccines away from anybody".

Even if Kennedy sticks to his word there is concern about how his appointment would reshape public faith in vaccinations.

• [Caroline Kennedy: my cousin RFK Jr's antivax views are dangerous](#)

Routine coverage in children is falling — nationwide uptake rates are below 93 per cent, down from 95 per cent before the pandemic — while the number of preventable outbreaks is rising. This year there were 16 measles outbreaks in America, up from four last year.

"You don't have to take the vaccine away," said Gostin. "You can sow such public distrust by just questioning their safety [so] that people don't take them."

Green, the governor of Hawaii, agrees. "He'll plant the seed of doubt in many families' minds who may be on the fence about vaccination," he said. "That will have fatal consequences."

Kennedy and his organisation were approached for comment but did not reply.

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