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Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Nominated as HHS Secretary: Choices for Senators and Healthcare Providers

President-elect Donald Trump has nominated several controversial figures for cabinet positions. On November 14, Trump announced Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as his choice for Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary (1). Although several of Trump's nominees are marginal, I could not have imagined a worse choice than Kennedy. As many cringe at the thought of a number of Trump's nominees, I join many of my fellow healthcare providers and scientists in their abhorrence at Kennedy's nomination.

Kennedy has long promoted anti-vaccine misinformation and public-health conspiracy theories (2,3). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he has emerged as a leading proponent of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation (4). Many of his false public health claims have targeted prominent figures such as Anthony Fauci, Bill Gates, and Joe Biden. He has written books, including *The Real Anthony Fauci* (5) and *A Letter to Liberals* (6), perpetuating his lies. Kennedy has insinuated that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) isn't the cause of AIDS, that Wi-Fi induces "leaky brain," that chemicals in the water are responsible for "sexual dysphoria," and that Anthony Fauci and Bill Gates led a cartel to prolong the COVID pandemic and "amplify its mortal effects in order to promote their mischievous inoculations" (7).

The events in Samoa in 2018, as summarized in a recent article in the *New Yorker*, illustrate what might happen with Kennedy in control of the US Health care system (7). "In 2018, two children in Samoa died after receiving measles vaccines, because the nurses who administered them had mistakenly mixed the vaccine with a powerful muscle relaxant (atracurium). Local vaccine skeptics seized on the tragedy, and the government temporarily suspended its immunization program. Children's Health Defense, an organization chaired by Kennedy, posted about the events on Facebook, where the group was one of the largest purchasers of anti-vaccine advertisements. Although, following an investigation, the Samoan government reinstated the program, immunization rates nevertheless remained perilously low, with less than one-third of infants getting vaccinated. A few months later, the country experienced a devastating measles outbreak. Nearly six thousand people were infected, and more than seventy children died. Kennedy, who had meanwhile visited the island, sent the Prime Minister a letter raising the "regrettable possibility that these children are casualties" of vaccination, rather than a lack thereof. He later called the outbreak "mild" and branded a Samoan vaccine opponent a "medical freedom hero." (7). In a country with a population of slightly over 200,000 people, most would consider an

outbreak of 6,000 measles cases more than mild.

However, not all of Kennedy's claims are unreasonable. He has also railed against gross conflicts of interest in health care and against the influence of corporations, especially pharmaceutical companies. These companies use dubious tactics to extend patent protections and keep drug prices unconscionably high. He appears deeply concerned about the staggering rates of chronic disease in this country, and correctly condemns the long-standing failure to meaningfully reform the American food system, which is characterized by a glut of ultra-processed products, owing partly to unhealthful agricultural subsidies. The US heavily subsidizes commodity crops, such as corn and soy, which are frequently used as sweeteners and additives. Politicians in both parties receive enormous sums of money from the food, agriculture, and pharmaceutical industries. Kennedy has promised to free regulatory agencies from "the smothering cloud of corporate capture" (7). This is sure to hit a sour note with corporations that deploy legions of lobbyists to shape regulations. He has supported reproductive rights, arguing that abortion should be legal and that mothers are better equipped to decide when to terminate a pregnancy than politicians and judges, a position that likely will offend the pro-life movement. As pointed out in by Dhruv Khullar these opinions might sufficiently offend some right-wing conservatives and ultimately sink his nomination (7). Despite these more reasonable stances Kennedy is hardly the best candidate available.

Trump's choice of the unqualified Kennedy to lead the world's largest healthcare system seems to be little more than political payback for a man who, as recently as April, Trump called a "radical left lunatic" (8). At another time the sheer volume of Kennedy's bizarre

and misleading statements would likely have disqualified him from running the world's largest healthcare system. US Senators now have a choice: vote to confirm Kennedy, with all its dire public health consequences, or block his nomination and risk the vengeance of the President -elect. Blocking Trump appointments on any ground would require an uncommon level of courage from Congressional lawmakers, who have mostly been unwilling to defy even the most brazen whims of the President-elect.

In the interim, let me lend my small voice to the more than 75 Nobel Prize Laureates opposing Kennedy's confirmation (9). Healthcare providers may also face a choice. If Kennedy is confirmed, it is likely they will be pressured to act in the best interests of those who seek financial or political gain rather than in the best interests of our patients. For example, healthcare providers could be forbidden to discuss vaccination much like some states have prohibited discussions regarding abortion. We need to remember who we serve and act according to our consciences.

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*The views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the California/Arizona Thoracic Society or the American Thoracic Society.