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After a tumultuous hearing process, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. confirmed as head of HHS

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The Buzz This Week

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. was confirmed in the US Senate on Thursday to be the next leader of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Following Kennedy's confirmation, President Donald Trump signed an executive order creating a "Make America Healthy Again" Commission, which will focus on investigating "the root causes of America's escalating health crisis," with an initial focus on pediatric chronic disease. Mr. Kennedy will chair the commission.

Kennedy's nomination and confirmation process have been highly controversial. During his initial hearings in the Senate Finance Committee, heated outbursts from audience members led to several attendees being escorted from the room.

In that initial hearing, the vote was a direct party split—with all Republicans voting in favor of Kennedy, and all Democrats voting against. The deciding vote came down to Senator Bill Cassidy, MD, (R-La.), who sharply questioned Kennedy about his positions on vaccines during the hearings. Cassidy practiced for years in public hospitals in Louisiana and has been a long-time advocate for vaccination.

The full Senate vote was 52-48, with all Democrats voting against Kennedy. Mitchell McConnell (R-Ky.), a polio survivor and advocate of vaccines, was the lone Republican Senator to vote against Kennedy.

Kennedy has a history of questioning the safety of vaccines and falsely linking them to autism. He also criticized public measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 and has propagated a number of disproven conspiracy theories, such as the claim that 5G cellular networks allow the government to collect user data and "control" behavior. At the same time, he also has spoken out against pesticide use, processed foods, food additives, and fluoridated water.

Past statements regarding the efficacy and safety of vaccines, financial ties to litigation against drug and vaccine makers, and a general distrust for much of the American healthcare system have all become criticisms levied against him.

During the initial Senate Finance Committee hearings, Senator Cassidy posted on X (formerly Twitter) that he had decided to vote in favor of Kennedy after receiving “unprecedented” and “serious commitments” from the current Trump Administration. This included a pledge to maintain a key federal advisory board related to vaccines, work within the “established, existing vaccine safety systems,” and include Cassidy in HHS hiring decisions.

Why It Matters

Kennedy's critics point out that he is not qualified to lead HHS because he is not a medical or healthcare professional, and many of his views lack scientific evidence. During his confirmation hearings, Kennedy was confused about basic elements of Medicare and Medicaid, and was unfamiliar with a law related to emergency abortions.

However, supporters say that given the abysmal state of US health and healthcare, he is the type of disruptor needed to turn around the system. At one point considered a potential “no” vote, Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) stated, “I hope [Kennedy] goes wild and actually finds a way to reduce the cost of health care.”

Despite his past documented views against vaccines, Kennedy ultimately stated in his hearings, “I'll support vaccines. I support the childhood schedule.” However, he also has said that “if vaccines are working for somebody, I'm not going to take them away. People ought to have a choice...people can make individual assessments.”

While optionality may seem like a flexible, moderate policy, a vaccine program is only effective if a sufficient proportion of the population has achieved immunity, known as herd immunity. Eliminating the required childhood vaccine schedule would introduce an enormous threat to public health.

Ultimately, the commitments Cassidy referenced as leading to his support for Kennedy are only promises at this point. It remains to be seen what health and healthcare-related policies will be pushed forward with Kennedy leading HHS.

McConnell delivered advice for Kennedy after his confirmation: “As he takes office, I sincerely hope Mr. Kennedy will choose not to sow further doubt and division but to restore trust in our public health institutions.”

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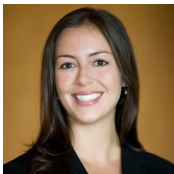
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