

Opinion

Six surgeons general: RFK Jr. is a threat to the health of Americans

It was our duty in office to warn of dangers when we found them. We're doing that again today.

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As former U.S. surgeons general appointed by every Republican and Democratic president since George H.W. Bush, we have collectively spent decades in service as the Nation's Doctor. We took two sacred oaths in our lifetimes: first, as physicians who swore to care for our patients and, second, as public servants who committed to protecting the health of all Americans.

Today, in keeping with those oaths, we are compelled to speak with one voice to say that the actions of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. are endangering the health of the nation. Never before have we issued a joint public warning like this. But the profound, immediate and unprecedented threat that Kennedy's policies and positions pose to the nation's health cannot be ignored.

Despite differences in perspectives, we have always been united in an unwavering commitment to science and evidence-based public health. It is that shared principle that led us to this moment.

Over recent months, we have watched with increasing alarm as the foundations of our nation's public health system have been undermined. Science and expertise have taken a back seat to ideology and misinformation. Morale has plummeted in our health agencies, and talent is fleeing at a time when we face rising threats — from resurgent infectious diseases to worsening chronic illnesses.

Repairing this damage requires a leader who respects scientific integrity and transparency, listens to experts and can restore trust to the federal health apparatus. Instead, Kennedy has become a driving force behind this crisis.

HHS is the one of largest civilian agencies in the federal government, with a nearly \$2 trillion budget and oversight of programs and agencies that touch every American family and business: Medicare, Medicaid, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health and more. It requires steady, ethical leadership grounded in science.

By contrast, Kennedy has spent decades advancing dangerous and discredited claims about vaccines — most notoriously, the thoroughly discredited theory that childhood vaccines cause autism. He has promoted misinformation about the HPV vaccine, which protects against cervical cancer, and he has repeatedly misrepresented the risks of mRNA technology and coronavirus vaccines, despite their lifesaving impact during the pandemic.

This year, as the United States faced its worst measles outbreak in more than 30 years, Kennedy de-emphasized vaccination and directed agency resources toward unproven vitamin therapies. The result: months-long outbreak, three preventable deaths and the first measles-related child death in the U.S. in over two decades.

More recently, Kennedy removed every member of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, replacing its scientific experts with individuals who often lacked basic qualifications, some of whom are vaccine conspiracy theorists. The new committee has already begun casting doubt on the hepatitis B vaccine for newborns, despite decades of data affirming its effectiveness and strong safety profile.

Discrediting vaccines undermines one of the most important public health tools in American history. Thanks to widespread immunization, we eradicated smallpox, eliminated polio in the U.S. and prevented an estimated 1.1 million deaths and 508 million infections among children born between 1994 and 2023. Operation Warp Speed, initiated under President Donald Trump, brought lifesaving mRNA vaccines to the world in record time.

Yet Kennedy continues to ignore science and the public's wishes. Most recently, HHS proposed new warning labels on products containing acetaminophen (Tylenol), citing a supposed link between prenatal use and autism. This move has been widely condemned by the scientific and medical communities, who have pointed out that the available research is inconclusive and insufficient to justify such a warning. In an extraordinary and unprecedented response, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and other leading health organizations issued public guidance urging physicians and patients to disregard HHS's recommendation. Instead of helping pregnant women make informed decisions during a critical period in their lives, Kennedy's decisions risk causing confusion, fear and harm.

Rather than combating the rapid spread of health misinformation with facts and clarity, Kennedy is amplifying it. The consequences aren't abstract. They are measured in lives lost, disease outbreaks and an erosion of public trust that will take years to rebuild.

It is essential to note that good science and public health require not only evidence but also people — the scientists, public health professionals and civil servants whose expertise protects millions of Americans. Yet under Kennedy's leadership, the HHS workforce has been badly damaged. He has silenced and sidelined hundreds of scientists, public health officials and medical professionals, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Many of the nation's top public health professionals — people we have worked with during crises — have resigned or retired early. They describe a culture of intimidation, where scientific findings are censored, evidence is disregarded and career officials are pressured to rubber stamp conclusions that are not backed by science.

The shooting at CDC headquarters in Atlanta this year only deepened the crisis. As former commanding officers of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, we know that caring for your people is the sacred duty of a leader. Yet, in the face of tragedy, Kennedy denigrated CDC staff as corrupt and repeated conspiracy theories that contribute to the targeting of the very staff he is charged with protecting. We will not soon forget the heartbreaking calls we received from CDC employees, expressing how scared and betrayed they felt for simply doing their jobs to serve the American people.

It's worth reminding ourselves what Kennedy puts at risk. The FDA approves lifesaving drugs and holds pharmaceutical companies to high standards of safety and effectiveness. NIH pursues and funds cutting-edge research. CDC leads in emergencies from pandemics to opioids to natural disasters. Agencies at HHS spearhead efforts to address issues regarding mental health, substance-use disorders, primary care shortages and health insurance coverage for millions of seniors, disabled individuals, and low-income Americans. Mismanaging HHS endangers America's health, undermines national security and damages our economic resilience and international credibility.

America's public health systems are essential to the well-being of the nation. We are clear-eyed about the fact that these systems need to be improved, including paying more attention to areas such as disease prevention, mental health and chronic illness. But reform must be grounded in truth, transparency and scientific evidence. Without this foundation, we risk not only halting progress but reversing it — costing lives in the process.

Secretary Kennedy is entitled to his views. But he is not entitled to put people's health at risk. He has rejected science, misled the public and compromised the health of Americans. The nation deserves a health and human services secretary who is committed to scientific integrity and can restore morale and trust in our public health agencies. Having served at senior levels in government, we know that politics are complicated. But this is bigger than politics. It's about putting the health of Americans first.
