

What R.F.K. Jr.'s Alliance With Trump Could Mean for Public Health

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has long voiced doubts about vaccine safety, has hopes of influencing federal health policy. Could he finally get the chance?



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Sept. 18, 2024

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“Make America healthy again!”

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. looked out into the crowd in Glendale, Ariz., on Saturday at his first major campaign event for his onetime rival, former President Donald J. Trump, and talked up their future together — one he hopes will finally bring his long-held agenda for public health to fruition.

“He’s going to end the chronic disease epidemic,” said Mr. Kennedy, who has for years expressed doubts about the safety of vaccinating children and has pushed conspiracy theories about the inner workings of federal health agencies. “And he wanted my help to do it.”

As a candidate polling in the single digits, Mr. Kennedy had no path to the White House. But now, as an ally of Mr. Trump’s who has already been named to the transition team that would advise on personnel and policy priorities, he has very real opportunities to exert influence and gain power in a field where he has long been considered a fringe voice.

Historically, members of a winning candidate’s transition team often end up in prestigious positions themselves. Mr. Trump said in an interview with CNN that he “probably would” appoint Mr. Kennedy to a role in a second Trump administration.

In an interview on Tuesday, Mr. Kennedy confirmed that Mr. Trump “asked me to be involved in the administration at a high level.” He said they had not discussed the specific role yet, given the “legal constraints” of doing so before the election.

“We’ve talked about the sort of general role in looking at corruption across the agencies, having some kind of portfolio that would look at unraveling corruption — and particularly in the agencies that I’ve had a lot of litigation experience with,”

Mr. Kennedy said, citing several federal agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, National Institutes of Health, Environmental Protection Agency and C.D.C. “And public health: in doing what needs to be done to end the chronic disease epidemic. So those are the two areas that he’s asked me to be involved with.”

Mr. Kennedy would likely struggle to achieve Senate confirmation for a cabinet post, like secretary of health and human services, or to head an agency, like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But Mr. Trump could appoint him to a White House position, such as a seat on the domestic policy council, with no obstacles. The former president has already indicated that he would establish a panel of experts to work with Mr. Kennedy to investigate the “toxins” behind chronic health issues in children.

That prospect concerns many public health officials who are not themselves overtly political.

“For elected officials — or the people who are advising or are appointed by elected officials — we want to make sure they have the best interest of families and children at heart,” said Dr. James Campbell, an infectious disease physician and pediatric vaccine expert at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. “My knowledge of statements made in the past — they make me concerned.”

Mr. Kennedy has promoted theories that suggest H.I.V. is not the true cause of AIDS, that 5G networks are being used for mass surveillance and that Black Americans in particular should avoid being vaccinated.

Mr. Kennedy has also likened some Covid policies to conditions experienced by Jewish people during the Holocaust and wrote a book arguing that Bill Gates and Dr. Anthony S. Fauci conspired with vaccine manufacturers for their own profit. These were among a multitude of other theories so robust that a social media research nonprofit called Mr. Kennedy one of the top 12 superspreaders of misinformation about Covid on the internet.

In a time when an array of pathogens — bird flu, mpox and new variants of Covid, among others — could potentially cause major disease outbreaks, health experts say confidence in vaccines and the agencies that oversee their approval is more important than ever.

But at the Saturday rally, Mr. Kennedy denounced the “corrupt murderous state of corporate power” that he said had given major pharmaceutical companies and other groups “control of the F.D.A.” He promised to “eliminate” the corruption inside the agencies.

Here is a look at Mr. Kennedy’s public health résumé and views.

Children's health and vaccines

Mr. Kennedy is on leave as the chairman and chief legal counsel of Children's Health Defense, an organization that falsely links vaccines to autism, developmental delays and even asthma. With roots in the environmental movement, he and the group refer to the vaccination of children as a "toxic exposure," alongside true toxic threats (lead and pesticides) and others not proven (acetaminophen and 5G wireless).

The group promotes its own database of research to support the theories and encourages whistle-blowers to reach out through encrypted messages about government efforts to cover up harm.

Last month, Mr. Kennedy lost a court bid to have two videos of his restored to YouTube that the platform removed after deciding that they violated rules protecting against misinformation.

Still, his organization's website serves as its own platform; the next day, the group promoted new research suggesting that mRNA vaccines increase the risk of a Covid infection. It plans to release a new film on Covid vaccines this week titled "Vaxxed 3: Authorized to Kill," which claims that Covid vaccines led to "tragic outcomes of either death or serious injury." (Scientists say there is evidence of debilitating side effects that have evaded attention, but they are rare.)

A New York Times review of Mr. Kennedy's statements found that he cast doubt on vaccine safety when speaking to sympathetic audiences, but struck a more centrist tone when speaking to mainstream groups.

Dr. David Gorski, a cancer surgeon at the Karmanos Cancer Institute in Michigan and Ohio who has tracked Mr. Kennedy's health statements for nearly 20 years, said the narratives had been destructive.

When public health officials worried in 2019 that the anti-vaccine movement was driving a deadly measles outbreak in Samoa, for example, Mr. Kennedy wrote to the nation's prime minister on Children's Health Defense letterhead, suggesting that the failure of vaccines given to pregnant women and children was the true culprit.

"It is a regrettable possibility that these children are casualties" of the vaccine, Mr. Kennedy wrote. More than 50 children were killed in the outbreak.

"He is quite a magician, from the standpoint of being able to pull the wool over people's eyes," said Dr. Richard Allen Williams, a cardiologist and the president of the Minority Health Institute. Dr. Williams worries that certain marginalized groups could be more susceptible to Mr. Kennedy's claims. "Many people will not see what he's aiming to do. Therein lies the danger," he said.

“The public is what I would call the proverbial chicken house, and I look at R.F.K. Jr. as a fox,” Dr. Williams added. “He’s looking for a way in — to gain control. That would be disastrous.”

In the Tuesday interview, Mr. Kennedy said that in a federal government role, he would not do away with all vaccine research funding, but he emphasized the need to prioritize chronic disease over infectious disease.

“I think we need to reallocate a lot of energy and resources toward eliminating the causes of chronic disease and studying the causes — identifying the etiology and the origins of chronic diseases — rather than focusing on cures and treatments which benefit the pharmaceutical industry. They may alleviate some suffering in people, but wouldn’t it be better to eliminate the disease altogether, rather than having them be dependent on pharmaceutical products for the rest of their lives?”

Covid

Some of Mr. Kennedy’s philosophies during the Covid pandemic were more mainstream: He opposed stay-at-home orders and mask mandates, expressed worry about children missing months of in-person schooling and criticized even Mr. Trump for his role as president in restricting those freedoms.

“He didn’t stand up for the Constitution when it really mattered,” Mr. Kennedy said of Mr. Trump at the Libertarian National Convention in May. The lockdowns, he said, produced the “greatest restriction on individual liberties this country has ever known.”

To many — even to some who were involved in the pandemic response — the critique was warranted. Dr. Francis Collins, who served as director of the National Institutes of Health from 2009 to 2021, said publicly last summer that public health leaders had made the “really unfortunate” mistake of ignoring all the collateral damage that would come from school closures, business shutdowns and other policies designed to curb transmission.

Dr. Fauci, a lead member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force under Mr. Trump and later the chief medical adviser to President Biden, acknowledged that the decision to mandate vaccines led to a “paradoxical” pushback from those who might not have otherwise been opposed to getting immunized.

“I certainly think things could have been done differently — and better — on both sides,” Dr. Fauci said. “I mean, anybody who thinks that what we or anybody else did was perfect is not looking at reality.”

But to Mr. Trump and his followers, Mr. Kennedy embodies something of an anti-Fauci. And some of Mr. Kennedy’s other views around Covid are far more extreme than a mere difference in cost-benefit analyses of mandates and lockdowns. One of

his books, “The Wuhan Cover-Up,” details an extensive conspiracy theory involving Bill Gates, medical journals and Chinese-engineered biological weapons.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Kennedy promoted several discredited Covid treatments including ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine. In the interview, he doubled down, saying that the two were “devastatingly effective” against Covid but were unfairly discredited because they could have threatened the emergency use authorizations for vaccines and because they had expired patents, making them much less expensive.

“Unfortunately, the regulatory agencies pay too much attention to the mercantile interests of pharmaceutical companies and too little to actual public health,” he said.

Mr. Kennedy has also claimed that Covid was engineered to target Caucasian and Black people and spare those of Chinese and Ashkenazi Jewish heritage. And he has said he would fight the next pandemic not by prioritizing the research and development of defenses, but instead by “building people’s immune systems.”

To many public health experts, that mission — laid out in no uncertain terms — is most worrisome.

“I’m going to say to N.I.H. scientists, God bless you all,” Mr. Kennedy said last November. “Thank you for public service. We’re going to give infectious disease a break for about eight years.”

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: Turn Toward Trump Could Let R.F.K. Jr. Shape Health Policy