

Robert F. Kennedy Jr's "complete lie" over deadly Samoan measles outbreak

John Braddock
2 February 2025

Samoa's director general of health has denounced as "a complete lie" Robert F Kennedy Jr's comments in the US Senate last week about the country's 2019 measles epidemic. President Trump's nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was questioned during his confirmation hearing over his activities in Samoa during the deadly outbreak.

Kennedy's nomination has sparked unprecedented alarm from medical professionals with more than 15,000, including 75 Nobel laureates, signing a letter to the Senate arguing that Kennedy is unfit and would put American public health "in jeopardy."

Following the first day of Kennedy's hearing, Samoa's top health official Aiono Professor Dr Alec Ekeroma, told Radio NZ (RNZ) on Friday his appointment to head the HHS would be a "disaster for public health in the world." Ekeroma said the measles outbreak in the Pacific was a tragedy in the country's history and to have "an anti-vaxxer at the top of the United States health system is not good for anyone."

After several cases of measles entered Samoa from New Zealand in October 2019 the disease exploded: in a population of 200,000 more than 5,700 were infected and 83 died, almost all of them young children. Hospitals were overrun and a state of emergency declared. Police were deployed to impose a nationwide quarantine as the epidemic ran out of control.

Kennedy and his wife, actress Cheryl Hines, turned up in Samoa in June, four months before the outbreak. The visit was arranged by a prominent local anti-vaxxer, coconut farmer Edwin Tamasese, who was later charged with incitement against a government order. Kennedy met with anti-vaccine advocates, publicly supported them and lent credibility to elements responsible for vaccine hesitancy.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that anti-vaccine groups had been stoking fears with a social

media campaign, noting that "this is now being measured in the lives of children who have died in the course of this outbreak." Kate O'Brien, director of the WHO immunisation department, told the *Guardian* in 2019 that misinformation about vaccines "had a very remarkable impact on the immunisation program" in Samoa.

Kennedy is an anti-vaccination zealot and has opposed pasteurization, water fluoridation and other long-established scientific practices. He has vilified federal agencies charged with vaccine production and safety, promoted false claims linking vaccines to autism and challenged official lists of recommended vaccines for children. He founded and chaired one of the most prominent anti-vax groups, Children's Health Defense (CHD), a multi-million dollar superspreader of online anti-vaccine misinformation.

The WSWS described Kennedy's performance in the Senate hearing as a farrago of "lies, half-truths and disinformation" supporting his effort to become leader of Trump's war on public health. He pledged to dismantle all access to abortion and reproductive rights for women, cast doubt on the life-saving benefits of vaccines against measles and COVID-19 and denigrated all public health measures necessary to stop the spread of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Questioned during the hearing, Kennedy flatly said since his visit to Samoa came months before the outbreak he couldn't be held responsible. He maintained he had nothing to do with vaccines, but instead simply sought to help digitise health records. Kennedy maintained the vaccination rate on the island was already low before he arrived. "I never gave any public statements about vaccines," he asserted. "You will not find a single Samoan who says I didn't get a vaccination due to Robert Kennedy."

New Zealand vaccinologist Helen Petousis-Harris told RNZ that in fact there would have been many people in

Samoa who “absolutely” did not get vaccinated due to Kennedy’s influence. “There has been an active opposition to vaccines in Samoa for many years, and that disinformation source is RFK (Kennedy) and his organisation [the CHD],” she said. Kennedy’s trip to the Pacific was funded by the CHD.

Samoa’s low immunisation levels had been exacerbated by a medical mishap in July 2018 that killed two babies, prompting widespread distrust in vaccinations. Two nurses were prosecuted and jailed for negligent manslaughter after mistakenly diluting the powdered vaccine with a dose of anaesthetic instead of water. The government suspended its vaccine program and the vaccination rate for newborn children plummeted from 60-70 percent to just 31 percent in the year prior to the outbreak.

Meanwhile, the CHD made posts on Facebook exploiting the deaths to attack vaccines. Local anti-vaccine activists circulated posts and statements by Kennedy and the CHD.

In Samoa, Kennedy met with prominent anti-vaccine activists and had pictures taken with them. He was fêted by Samoa’s political elite, meeting with officials and joining then Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi as a guest at the country’s independence celebrations. Tuilaepa’s government later faced enormous public anger over its failure to prevent what was an entirely foreseeable and preventable outbreak.

As the death toll rapidly escalated, the anti-vaxxers doubled down on lies about the cause and promoted bogus “cures.” Kennedy wrote to the Samoan government, calling on the health ministry to “determine, scientifically, if the outbreak was caused by inadequate vaccine coverage or alternatively, by a defective vaccine.” He would later dismiss the epidemic as “mild.”

Petousis-Harris said Kennedy’s presence had weakened an “already fragile trust” in Samoa. “A person who has the status of RFK Jr just I guess further amplifies what those local anti-vaccine advocates had been saying,” she told RNZ. “And there’s a big price to pay, isn’t there? I mean, these were children’s lives.”

During his testimony, Kennedy made the bogus claim that tissue samples sent from Samoa to New Zealand during the outbreak showed “most of those people did not have measles, we do not know what was killing them.”

Professor Ekeroma told RNZ: “That’s a complete lie. There was only one post-mortem—no tissues were sent to New Zealand for the rest of the deaths in Samoa, because it was not necessary, because it was obvious these people

died from measles.”

Ekeroma said he had talked to the former director-general of health serving at the time, who confirmed no tissue samples were sent. “It was measles,” he repeated, “the diagnosis was made, there were many international experts that were on the ground at the time, including medical officers from New Zealand and Australia. They were all here, and they can vouch it was measles that killed these people.”

Dr Andrew Old, deputy director-general of the NZ Ministry of Health, told RNZ there were no tissue samples sent to New Zealand. Blood samples or swabs sent to Australia and New Zealand early during the outbreak did however confirm the virus. “The samples confirmed the Samoa outbreak had the same measles strain as New Zealand, which had its own outbreak at the time,” he said.

Several Democrats questioned Kennedy over his role in Samoa during the first day of the hearing. Senator Ron Wyden (D-Or) accused him of contributing to the deaths by “spreading lies” on the island. Governor Josh Green (D-Hawaii) bluntly told CNN: “He’s a liar and it’s bullshit.” Green, who led a US medical team to Samoa during the outbreak to help with the belated vaccination campaign, told interviewer Erin Burnett he had spoken to many locals who all confirmed Kennedy’s nefarious activities.

However, as the WSWS has explained, the hearings have been carried out in a “friendly, bipartisan” manner, with the Democrats largely engaged in a display of “tepid opposition.” No Democrats have spoken in any meaningful way against Kennedy’s nomination, let alone called for the mass mobilisation of the population to fight Trump’s war on public health.

Trump’s appointments are not a matter of “question marks” or “misjudgement” over this or that individual. He has selected an entire cabinet of oligarchs and fascists to carry out a social counter-revolution against the working class. Kennedy’s pending elevation to head the HHS threatens, as the WSWS warned at the outset, “a massive social retrogression, akin to sending the United States—the world’s richest capitalist country—back to the Middle Ages.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact