



New Report

Misinformation Kills: RFK Jr's Deadly Visit To Samoa

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Foreword *from* Hawaii Governor Josh Green, M.D.

As both a physician and Governor, I've seen the devastating effects of misinformation about vaccines. Tragically, 83 innocent people, mostly children, lost their lives. When people don't get vaccinated, we lose herd immunity and as a result, people die.

During a measles outbreak in the island nation of Samoa, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s rhetoric led to widespread fear, causing many to reject vaccinations. Tragically, 83 innocent children lost their lives. My team and I were called in by Samoa's prime minister to help, and we vaccinated over 36,000 people to stop the outbreak – but it was too late for too many young lives.

When we arrived, the country was completely devastated by measles. Hospitals which usually only had four beds now had 28 to handle the influx of patients. Across the room, more than two dozen children laid in beds, feverish, covered in rashes, and gasping for air. You could see fear in the faces of the people, because some of those children were not going to make it.

As we went around to the villages, people were desperate to be vaccinated. When you see what happens in an outbreak like this, people quickly come to understand the importance of vaccines and prevention. In one village, a child had just died – they were still warm – so we had a funeral service and then immediately vaccinated their siblings. Then we had to move on to the next village.

If we hadn't been able to raise the vaccination rate, 40,000 more people would have gotten measles, leading to 600 more deaths of mostly babies between the ages of six months to four years. Fortunately, thanks to the power of vaccines, we were able to save tens of thousands of people from getting the measles and hundreds of fatalities from occurring.

But we cannot forget it was too late for 83 people. That's what RFK did. Samoa was a preventable tragedy. He torpedoed the vaccination program in Samoa and, if he is confirmed as HHS Secretary, he will do it again here. That will mean too many people won't get vaccinated because of misinformation or inability due to his policies. We will not have herd immunity, and physicians like myself and pediatricians and all sorts of other health care providers will see cataclysmic spread of disease.

Putting someone with zero experience in charge of the largest public health institute in the world would be catastrophic. He has no experience in health care, no degree, no public health credentials. You can't fake that kind of expertise.

He is deeply unqualified and is the worst possible choice to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. It's not a game, and Americans are not chess pieces. This is life or death – and I saw the dangerous consequences of RFK Jr. anti-vaccine zealotry first hand. We can't let such a preventable disaster happen again.

Misinformation Kills: RFK Jr's Deadly Visit To Samoa

Introduction

Anti-vaccination conspiracy theories have deadly consequences. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Donald Trump's nominee for the next Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has a long track-record of peddling dangerous conspiracies around public health. The devastating events that followed his visit to Samoa in 2019 could be a preview of what's to come with Kennedy at the reins of our nation's public health care system.

Samoan doctors and nurses directly link a devastating measles outbreak that killed 83 people, primarily infants and children, to the false information about vaccines Kennedy spread during his visit. "We cannot and should not stay silent. We know what this appointment means. It means more platforms for anti-vaxxers and less funding for vaccines and health programmes," Aiono Prof Alec Ekeroma, Samoa's director general of health, [told the Guardian](#).

The Timeline:

2018

- Two children in Samoa died after receiving their MMR vaccine as a result of nurses improperly mixing the vaccines with a liquid muscle relaxant instead of water. The nurses were [sentenced](#) to five years in prison for manslaughter.
- RFK Jr's Children's Health Defense posted on Facebook [questioning](#) the safety of measles vaccines.
- The World Health Organization [estimated](#) that in 2018, only 31 percent of infants in Samoa received the measles vaccine, a drop from 60 to 70 percent in previous years.
- RFK Jr's Children's Health Defense never updated the public about the true cause of the babies' deaths.

2019

- While vaccination rates were dropping, Kennedy traveled to Samoa in June 2019, meeting with the Prime Minister and other government officials. The trip had been arranged by a prominent Samoan anti-vaccine activist, and paid for by Children's Health Defense. RFK Jr. appeared with government officials and local anti-vaccine activists.
- The measles outbreak began in September 2019.
- A state of emergency was declared in November 2019, closing all schools, keeping children under 17 away from public events, and mandating vaccines.
- The anti-vaccine activists with ties to Kennedy used misinformation and harsh rhetoric to oppose the government's efforts in containing the outbreak.
- By January 22, 2020, 5,707 measles cases and 83 measles-related deaths were reported. 87 percent of the reported deaths were children younger than 5 years.

The American people deserve a leader at HHS who believes in science, who believes in vaccines, and who is committed to lowering costs and protecting health care coverage. Kennedy will not trust the science and the experts, but he will instead continue his campaign of pushing dangerous misinformation. Not only does Kennedy oppose lifesaving vaccines, but he has said that he “does not believe that infectious disease is an enormous threat to human health” and pledged to stop funding research for treatments and cures. Kennedy will erode the public health institutions that keep Americans safe from infectious diseases and contaminated food, and he will put vital programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, at grave risk. The effects of Kennedy leading HHS would threaten every household in the nation.

2018: Spurred By Misinformation From Children’s Health Defense, Vaccination Rates In Samoa Cratered After A Tragic Nursing Error Resulted In The Deaths Of Two Children

Vaccination rates in Samoa cratered after two children died as a result of negligence by nurses. In 2018, two infants in Samoa died hours after receiving the MMR vaccine. The country temporarily halted its vaccine program, but it wasn’t the vaccine that caused the deaths. Two nurses improperly mixed the vaccines with a liquid muscle relaxant instead of water. The nurses were [sentenced](#) to five years in prison for manslaughter. The World Health Organization [estimated](#) that in 2018, only 31 percent of infants in Samoa received the measles vaccine, a drop from 60 to 70 percent in previous years.

RFK Jr’s Children’s Health Defense posted on Facebook questioning the safety of measles vaccines and never updated the public about the true cause of the babies’ deaths. In several Facebook posts in July and August 2018, Children’s Health Defense [questioned](#) the safety of the vaccines the infants received. Children’s Health Defense did not update the posts to explain the nurses’ error to its audience. Helen Petousis-Harris, a New Zealand-based vaccine safety expert told the [Washington Post](#), “The public were never told, for months, that it wasn’t the vaccine that killed the babies, which really was the most important message.”



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. with Prime Minister Tuilaepa Dr. Sailele Malielegaoi at Independence Day in 2019. (Photo: [Samoa Observer](#))

June 2019: RFK Jr. Visits Samoa And Meets With Political Leaders And Local Anti-Vaxxers To Spread Doubts About Vaccines



Kennedy with anti-vaccine activists Edwin Tamaese and Taylor Winterstein in June 2019

[Photo: [Children's Health Defense](#)]

While vaccination rates were dropping, Kennedy traveled to Samoa in June 2019 and appeared with government officials and local anti-vaccine activists. Kennedy [visited](#) Samoa in June 2019 with his wife where they were “distinguished guests” at Samoan independence celebrations. According to officials in the prime minister’s office, Kennedy and his wife were invited by the Independence committee. In a 2021 [blog post](#) on the Children’s Health Defense website, Kennedy acknowledged that the trip had been arranged by coconut farmer Edwin Tamasese, a prominent Samoan anti-vaccine activist, and paid for by Children’s Health Defense. An Instagram [photo](#) shows Kennedy embracing another Australian Samoan anti-vaccine activist, Taylor Winterstein, in Samoa on June 4, 2019. “I am deeply honored to have been in the presence of a man I believe is, can and will change the course of history,” Winterstein wrote in the caption, adding hashtags [#makinginformedchoices](#) [#investigatebeforeyouvaccinate](#).

Kennedy met with the Prime Minister on his trip to Samoa and later sent a letter after the measles outbreak began questioning whether the epidemic might have been sparked by a “defective vaccine.” Although public officials **claimed** at the time that Kennedy was in the country “for a programme that is not Government related,” Kennedy **told** the *Samoa Observer* in 2021 that he met with he and Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi had talked “a limited amount” about vaccines during their meeting. During the outbreak, Children’s Health Defense **shared** a four-page **letter** offering “assistance” that Kennedy wrote to Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegao in November 2019, in which he encouraged officials to examine the MMR vaccine itself as a possible cause. “To safeguard public health during the current infection and in the future, it is critical that the Samoan Health Ministry determine, scientifically, if the outbreak was caused by inadequate vaccine coverage or alternatively, by a defective vaccine,” Kennedy wrote. Kennedy further **claimed** that the vaccine might have “failed to produce antibodies” in vaccinated mothers sufficient to provide infants with immunity, that it perhaps provoked “the evolution of more virulent measles strains” and that children who received the vaccine may have inadvertently spread the virus to other children.

- **Kennedy met with the Samoan director general of health on his 2019 trip and told him that vaccines were unsafe and unproven.** According to the *Guardian*, a fractured health system and lack of confidence in vaccines **faced** Dr Take Naseri as director general of health during the measles outbreak in 2019. He met with Kennedy during his visit, on the advice of the then-prime minister, for a discussion he said centered around Kennedy’s vaccine safety fears. “He told me he thinks the data is not solid, but I told him with our small country we are very vulnerable to this disease. We are not rich. We don’t have the resources to manage it but we only have the resources to prevent it, which is what the vaccine does.”

During the measles outbreak Samoan anti-vaccine activists with ties to Kennedy continued to spread dangerous and inflammatory misinformation about vaccination.

After the measles outbreak struck and the Samoan government implemented an emergency compulsory anti-measles vaccination program to contain the spread, the anti-vaccine activists with ties to Kennedy opposed the effort with misinformation and harsh rhetoric. Taylor Winterstein **compared** the operation to Nazi Germany. Edwin Tamasese called it a “**killingspree**” and **said** the vaccination operation was “the greatest crime against our people. Tamasese also advocated against the use of conventional medicine and antibiotics and urged people to rely on papaya leaf extract and vitamins instead of the vaccine and antibiotics. Tamasese was eventually arrested and charged with incitement against a government order, but charges were later dismissed.

- **Sherri Tenpenny, who RFK has called “a great leader” in the anti-vaccine movement, followed his lead and called Samoa’s mass vaccination efforts to stop the outbreak a “travesty.”** Following Kennedy’s lead, Sherry Tenpenny, an American osteopath and prominent anti-vaxxer called Samoa’s mass vaccination drive in “travesty” and claiming that the vaccine itself was causing the outbreak. Kennedy has **called** Tenpenny “one of the great leaders of this movement” and she has suggested that she is in contact with him regarding a position in the Trump administration.

October 2019: Measles Outbreak In Samoa Kills Dozens Of Children



Funeral for Valisa Talosaga, 2, who died in the 2019 measles epidemic.

[Photo: [New York Times](#)]

83 people died in a 2019 outbreak of the measles in Samoa – overwhelmingly children under 5 years old. On October 16, 2019, the Samoan Ministry of Health **declared** a measles outbreak sparked by a sick traveler. By January 22, 2020, 5,707 measles cases and 83 measles-related deaths were reported. 87 percent of the reported deaths were children younger than 5 years, a mortality rate of approximately 25 deaths per 10,000 people in this age group and a staggering toll in the small island nation of around 200,000 citizens. Nearly every family in the country was affected by the outbreak, which has been **described** as traumatizing an entire generation and “robbing Samoa of its young.”

So many young children died in the measles outbreak that New Zealand sent dozens of infant-sized caskets to Samoa. The vast majority of deaths in the 2019 outbreak were children under 5 years old. Leausa Take Naseri, the Samoan Health Ministry's director general [told reporters](#) in November 2019, "The children are quite ill. Our ICUs have been dominated by these children." In December 2019, volunteers in Rotura, New Zealand [prepared](#) dozens of child-sized caskets to send to Samoa to help deal with the loss of so many infants and toddlers.

The UNICEF representative for Samoa described an entire country "consumed" by the measles outbreak with hundreds of children facing permanent complications and bereaved parents at risk of depression and substance abuse. Sheldon Yett, UNICEF representative for the Pacific Island countries [oversaw](#) the agency's work in Samoa during the outbreak. "I've been involved with measles outbreaks all around the world for 20 years in many countries in Africa, Asia, in Europe, and elsewhere", Yett said. "But this was something else. The entire country was consumed." In 2020, Samoa only had two consultant pediatricians tasked with visiting hospitals to follow up on children at risk of respiratory and neurological complications. At the same time, mental health teams, led by the country's only psychiatrist, were visiting bereaved parents and around 300 families of children who had been in intensive care, in order to identify parents at risk of depression and substance misuse, and to prepare them to spot potential signs of delayed learning or altered behaviour in their child.

Samoa now requires compulsory vaccination of children before starting primary school and measles vaccine rates have risen to 95%. According to aid workers, vaccine hesitancy in Samoa was still strong at the start of the 2019 outbreak, but demand grew as the outbreak mushroomed. A compulsory mass vaccination campaign brought rates back up to 95% and the government introduced a [new law](#) in December 2019 requiring all children to be fully immunised before starting primary school. The door-to-door vaccination campaign is [credited](#) with bringing the months-long tragedy to a close.

Kennedy Continues To Downplay The Seriousness Of The Measles Outbreak And Denies Responsibility For What Happened In Samoa

2021: Kennedy blamed the measles outbreak in Samoa on the “Global Medical Cartel” and claimed that the outbreak was “mild” until “the introduction of an Indian-manufactured MMR vaccine” caused many deaths. In a 2021 [blog post](#) on the Children’s Health Defense website, Kennedy wrote, “A nephew of the Prime minister was diagnosed with autism following a vaccine-induced fever and seizures and government officials, including the Prime Minister were curious to measure health outcomes following the ‘natural experiment’ created by the national respite from vaccines. Samoa’s choice had infuriated the Global Medical Cartel. A mild measles outbreak in November gave that cohort the opportunity to turn Tamasese into an international villain. Near the end of the month, following the introduction of an Indian-manufactured MMR vaccine, many Samoans began dying. On the ground, Samoan families blamed the vaccine and poor hospital protocols – mainly the use of panadol and widespread vaccination of measles-infected hospital patients – for the mortalities. The global cartel and the Pharma-compliant press blamed anti-vaxxers.”

2023: Kennedy Claims He Had “Nothing To Do With People Not Vaccinating In Samoa.” In an appearance in a 2023 [documentary](#) on vaccine opposition, Kennedy told an interview, “Yeah I’m aware there was a measles outbreak but I didn’t have anything.. You know, I had nothing to do with people not vaccinating in Samoa. I never told anybody not to vaccinate. I didn’t, you know, go there for any reason to do with that.” After making his comments on the Samoa measles outbreak, Kennedy [asked](#) the documentary filmmaker to let him “approve” the footage of their interview. The director refused.

Kennedy Has A Long History Of Opposing Measles Vaccines

Kennedy claimed that the global decline in measles cases was caused by “nutrition and clean water, not the vaccine” and questioned whether the MMR vaccine is necessary at all. In a 2019 [address](#) to Texans for Vaccine Choice shortly before his trip to Samoa, Kennedy discussed the cause of the global decline in measles outbreaks. “The drop in measles occurred before the vaccine was introduced,” Kennedy said “The thing that cured measles was nutrition and clean water, not the vaccine.” Kennedy questioned whether the MMR vaccine was necessary since tuberculosis and scurvy had been largely eradicated through similar methods without vaccines and he warned parents that pharmaceutical companies are “trying to get at your baby and force him to take their vaccines. And give him a lifetime dependency.”

RFK Jr.’s siblings warned that his anti-vaccine advocacy was spurring global outbreaks of the measles and calling him “tragically wrong about vaccines.” In May 2019, shortly before his trip to Samoa, two of RFK Jr.’s siblings and a niece authored an op-ed in *Politico* [denouncing](#) RFK Jr.’s anti-vaccine advocacy as dangerous. “The World Health Organization reports a 300 percent increase in the numbers of measles cases around the world this year compared with the first three months of 2018. More than 110,000 people are now dying from measles every year. The WHO, the health arm of the United Nations, has listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the top 10 threats to global health in 2019. Most cases of preventable diseases occur among unvaccinated children, because parents have chosen not to vaccinate, have delayed vaccination, have difficulty accessing vaccines, or the children were too young to receive the vaccines. These tragic numbers are caused by the growing fear and mistrust of vaccines—amplified by internet doomsayers. Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—Joe and Kathleen’s brother and Maeve’s uncle—is part of this campaign to attack the institutions committed to reducing the tragedy of preventable infectious diseases. He has helped to spread dangerous misinformation over social media and is complicit in sowing distrust of the science behind vaccines.”

In the middle of a measles outbreak in Minnesota’s Somali-American community, Kennedy told parents that “Africans and African Americans may be particularly vulnerable to vaccine injuries, including autism.” In 2017, amid a measles outbreak that was [devastating](#) Minnesota’s Somali-American community due to low vaccination rates, Kennedy continued to [push](#) his false claims that “science and anecdotal evidence suggest that Africans and African Americans may be particularly vulnerable to vaccine injuries including autism.”

Kennedy says he accosts strangers with babies and urges them not to vaccinate to “save” their children and that “there’s no vaccine that is safe and effective.” Kennedy [told](#) a [podcast](#) on the “state of health freedom” in 2021 that, “our job is to resist and to talk about [vaccines] to everyone.” Kennedy claimed that if he sees someone “on a hiking trail carrying a little baby and I say to him, ‘Better not get vaccinated.’ And he heard that from me. If he hears it from 10 other people, maybe he won’t do it, you know, maybe he will save that child.” In a July 2023 appearance on Lex Fridman’s [podcast](#), when pressed on whether he is opposed to all vaccines, Kennedy said, “There’s no vaccine that is safe and effective.” As recently as July 2023, Kennedy was promoting the false idea that vaccines cause autism [telling](#) Fox News, “I do believe that autism comes from vaccines.”

What Samoan Officials And Public Health Experts Say About RFK’s Involvement In The Measles Tragedy In Samoa

Samoa’s Director General of Health: RFK Jr’s nomination as HHS secretary “must be treated as a threat to our health security.” Samoan health officials are among those sounding alarm over Kennedy’s nomination. “We cannot and should not stay silent. We know what this appointment means. It means more platforms for anti-vaxxers and less funding for vaccines and health programmes,” Aiono Prof Alec Ekeroma, Samoa’s director general of health, [told](#) the *Guardian*. “It must be treated as a threat to our health security.”

Hawaii Governor and ER doctor Josh Green: “During a measles outbreak in Samoa, RFK Jr’s rhetoric led to widespread fear, causing many to avoid vaccination.” Hawaii Governor Josh Green [posted](#) on social media, “As both a physician and Governor, I’ve seen the devastating effects of misinformation about vaccines. During a measles outbreak in Samoa, RFK Jr’s rhetoric led to widespread fear, causing many to avoid vaccinations. Tragically, 83 innocent children lost their lives.” Green visited Samoa as part of a medical mission to assist during the measles outbreak in 2019 which he [called](#) a “disaster” that was “caused in large part by RFK Jr.”

Samoan nurse Moelagi Leilani Jackson said RFK Jr. gave credibility to local anti-vaccine activists and made their influence get “louder” during the measles epidemic. People who worked on the Samoan measles response [told](#) the Associated Press that the credibility RFK Jr. gave to anti-vaccine forces when he met with them had an impact. Moelagi Leilani Jackson, a Samoan nurse who worked on the vaccination campaign to stem the measles outbreak, said she remembered that after Kennedy’s visit, the anti-vaccine influencers “got louder.” “I feel like they felt they had the support of Kennedy. But I also think that Kennedy was very – well, he came in and he left and other people picked up the pieces.”

Pediatrician Paul Offitt: RFK Jr. had “everything to do with” the deadly measles outbreak in Samoa. Dr. Paul Offitt, a member of an FDA advisory committee on vaccines and director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, [told PBS NewsHour](#), “In Samoa, there were two children that died immediately following receipt of a measles vaccine. And the way it works into Samoa is, they have a MMR vaccine in powdered form. It needs to be diluted in water. Two nurses made a mistake. Instead of diluting it in water, they diluted it in a muscle relaxant. Those children stopped breathing and died immediately. Now, very quickly, within two weeks, it was realized what that mistake was. It was a nursing error. But, nonetheless, RFK Jr. seized on that. He flooded Facebook with information that measles vaccine is killing children in Samoa. He went to Samoa. He met with anti-vaccine activists. He met with senior officials in Samoa and kept the drumbeat alive that measles vaccine was killing children in Samoa. As a consequence, vaccination rates fell from 70 percent to 30 percent. And between September and December of 2019, there was a massive measles epidemic. In this island nation of 200,000 people, there were 57,000 cases of measles and 83 deaths. Most of those deaths were in children less than four years of age. And Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had everything to do with that. And that shows you how disinformation can kill.”

Vaccinologist Helen Petousis-Harris said Kennedy’s impact on the measles outbreak in Samoa was “devastating.” Helen Petousis-Harris, a New Zealand-based vaccinologist and co-director of the Global Vaccine Data Network, [told](#) the *Guardian* that Kennedy and Children’s Health Defense walked into a vacuum of mistrust in western medicine and the government in Samoa. “The Samoan establishment handled the whole situation really badly and did not take the support and advice that was provided to them at the time, which is what allowed this to unravel and let RFK get in there,” Petousis-Harris said. “When you get people who are wealthy and influential going into a fragile setting, it’s like the top of the food chain visiting and meeting up with those who act as the megaphone. The impact was devastating.”

- **Petousis-Harris: Kennedy and his associates “amplified the fear and mistrust, which resulted in the amplification of the epidemic and an increased number of children dying.”** Helen Petousis-Harris [told](#) the Associated Press that the crisis of low vaccination rates and skepticism created an environment that was “ripe for the picking for someone like RFK to come in and assist with the promotion of those views.” Petousis-Harris recalled that local and regional anti-vaccine activists took their cues from Kennedy, whom she said “sits at the top of the food chain as a disinformation source.” “They amplified the fear and mistrust, which resulted in the amplification of the epidemic and an increased number of children dying. Children were being brought for care too late.”

Australian physician Dan Holmes said that treating the Samoan measles epidemic “impacted me more than anything I’ve done. It makes me feel so angry that it could have been prevented.” Australian Anaesthetist Dr. Dan Holmes led an emergency medical team and was among more than 100 medical professionals who were deployed to Samoa during the epidemic. Holmes [told](#) the *Guardian* that he spent two “relentless” weeks trying to save babies with complications from measles including pneumonia, collapsed lungs, dehydration, and brain inflammation. “Your day might start at 6am with a baby who is unconscious and not breathing, and you might lose that baby, then there’s another one, day after day,” Holmes said. “It’s impacted me more than anything I’ve done. It makes me feel so angry that it could have been prevented.”

Journalist Brian Deer: “I’ll never forget what Kennedy did during Samoa’s measles outbreak.” In a *New York Times* [guest essay](#) author Brian Deer wrote, “I was in Samoa during that outbreak as part of my more than 16 years of reporting on the anti-vaccine movement. The cause of the outbreak was not the vaccine, but most likely an infected traveler who brought the virus from New Zealand, which that year had had the biggest measles outbreaks in decades, especially among that country’s Indigenous and Pacific Islander communities. Migration and poverty were likely factors in a sudden spread of measles in Samoa and New Zealand. But, as an editorial in *The New Zealand Medical Journal* reported, so too was a factor that Mr. Kennedy specializes in: ‘increasing circulation of misinformation leading to distrust and reduced vaccination uptake.’ Samoa’s vaccination rates had fallen to fewer than a third of eligible 1-year-olds. Vaccine skepticism has ballooned worldwide, and Mr. Kennedy and others who back him have encouraged it. Americans may be well aware that their possible future health leader holds dangerous beliefs about vaccines. The consequences of his views — and those of his orbit — are not merely absurd but tragic.”

Appendix: Video Resources

- [“The Saturday Show With Jonathan Capeheart,” MSNBC, 11/30/24](#)
- [“Rachel Maddow Show,” MSNBC, 11/26/24](#)
- [Gov. Josh Green Interview, CNN, 11/15/24](#)
- [“Shot in the Arm” aired on PBS 11/9/24](#)
- [“Mehdi Hasan Show,” MSNBC, 7/6/23](#)
- [“The Truth About RFK Jr”](#)