



By: *Sharmila Devi*

# World watching as Trump gambles on country's health



Could Trump's "war on science" lead to a bar on American travelling abroad? The idea may once have been outlandish, but officials around the world are closely watching the administration's handling of its first infectious disease emergency.

A child who was not vaccinated against measles **died** in the vaccine-sceptical state of Texas last week, where there are almost 160 reported cases of the disease, with many more cases likely unreported.

The Trump administration has frozen billions of dollars in research funds, laid off thousands of workers in scientific bodies such as the globally-respected National Institutes of Health, and suppressed preparations for next year's flu season. All this amid the measles outbreak but also as the human risk of avian influenza is rising.

US scientists are planning nationwide **rallies**, including in Washington DC on Friday, 7 March, to "Stand up for Science". Among their demands are an end to censorship and political interference in science, restoration of federal research funding, and reinstatement of wrongfully dismissed federal employees.

Trump may have shown his contempt by withdrawing from the World Health Organisation (WHO), but the global health body still has clout.

## The vitamin against measles

In 2000, WHO officially declared the US measles-free. That means countries did not have to demand proof of vaccination from US travellers as a condition of their entry as countries do with a variety of diseases, including yellow fever or hepatitis.

The Pan-American Health Organisation, WHO's regional office, is **reconsidering** this measles-free status. "The risk of outbreaks has increased, given the increase in measles cases worldwide, coupled with factors such as low coverage of the first and second doses of measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine," it said.

## Robert F. Kennedy Junior is fulfilling the worst nightmares of public health officials

Robert F. Kennedy Junior, secretary of the health and human services (HSS) department, is fulfilling the worst nightmares of public health officials, having failed to actively urge parents to get their children vaccinated against measles, saying the decision was a "personal" one.

His most proactive stance on measles so far is announcing that the federal government is **shipping** doses of vitamin A to Gaines County in Texas, the epicentre of the measles outbreak. Doctors say they have never heard of a physician using the vitamin against measles.

Around 107,500 people died from measles in 2023, with most of the cases in countries with low per capita incomes and weak health infrastructure, **says** the WHO. One in 20 children with measles develop pneumonia, and one in 1,000 experience swelling of the brain, which can leave a child deaf or with an intellectual disability. For every 1,000 children with measles, one or two die.

Furthermore, research conducted over the last decade shows that measles destroys immune cells, leaving survivors with long-term vulnerability to other diseases.

Two doses of the measles vaccine give 97% efficacy against the virus, which can linger in the air hours after a carrier leaves the room, and a population needs a vaccination rate of at least 95%.

## A "conscientious exemption"

But this fact is falling on many deaf ears in Texas, where some 13% of parents of public school children have claimed a "conscientious exemption" for at least one vaccine, and reports have indicated resistance is hardening.

“We’re not going to harm our children or [risk] the potential to harm our children so that we can save yours,” Kaleigh Brantner, whose unvaccinated seven-year-old son recently recovered from measles, **told** the Washington Post.

Public health officials are also worrying about possible interference with and delays to the production of flu vaccines after two meetings of vaccine experts have been cancelled and postponed by Trump officials in the last few weeks.

### This year’s flu season has taken a high toll in the US

Already, this year’s flu season has taken a high toll in the US. Some 86 children and 19,000 adults died from flu this season, and another 430,000 people were hospitalised, **according** to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Flu vaccines have to be updated each year using data from the WHO and other agencies, and strains are usually chosen by March because there is a six-month production cycle.

### “Radical transparency”

One of Kennedy’s claims during his confirmation hearings was that 97% of the members of the Advisory Committee on Immunisation Practices (ACIP), the CDC’s vaccine advisory committee, had financial conflicts of interest.

This was sharply refuted by Tom Frieden, former CDC director. “The idea that ACIP members are profiting from their work is a deliberate distortion,” Frieden **wrote** on LinkedIn. “Vaccines save lives and prevent suffering.”



Robert F. Kennedy's department announced plans to eliminate public participation in many of its policy decisions

Kennedy has also rowed back on his confirmation promise of “radical transparency” at the HHS, which directs \$3 trillion in healthcare spending and oversees the CDC, NIH, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Medicare and Medicaid health insurance programmes.

His department last week announced plans to eliminate public participation in many of its policy decisions, reversing a decades-long practice of allowing public comment.

Meanwhile, a \$590 million contract that was awarded to Moderna to develop a bird flu vaccine is being re-evaluated by Trump officials. The bird flu outbreak in US poultry has killed 166 million chickens since 2022 and infected nearly 1,000 dairy herds and almost 70 people, including one who died, since early 2024. Egg prices in the US are soaring and the country is scrambling to look into importing more.

It is not a good time to get sick in the US.