

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA)

Senate Floor Speech prior to Final Confirmation Vote on RFK Jr. to be Secretary of the Health and Human Services Administration

[VIDEO](#) | [AUDIO](#)

Senator Cantwell: Mr. President, I rise to share my deep concerns about entrusting our nation's ability to respond to another pandemic, our world leading medical innovation infrastructure, the ability of women in my state to choose a medical abortion, and continued research for health care of millions of Americans, putting that in the hands of the HHS Secretary nominee, Robert F. Kennedy.

We all agree that our health care system could be reformed. It can be bloated; it can be maddening. Too many people have gotten the dreaded letter from an insurance company telling them 'sorry, your procedure isn't covered.' And if you don't have insurance, you avoid that doctor visit and you pay out of pocket, or maybe you wait till you end up in the emergency room and have to deal with medical debt. And we all know the cost of prescription drugs are too high.

We agree that we're spending way too much and that we need better outcomes. So, you only have to look at the health outcomes of virtually every other industrialized nation to know that they spend less and get better results. But rather than choose a new leader for the Health and Human Services agency that would lead us down that better path, President Trump's nominee would get us stuck in conspiracy theories that would cost us lives.

The nominee has been a purveyor of disinformation. As my colleague from Rhode Island just mentioned, sowing doubt about life saving vaccines, he said [...] that COVID 19 was a bio-weapon that spared Jews and the Chinese [...].

Achieving better health outcomes, both today and in the future, happens when we follow science. Not conspiracy theories, but science. I happen to represent a very innovative science state, and right now, it's a choice about innovation versus the skepticism represented by this nominee.

Instead of speeding up innovation, under Mr. Kennedy, we would be taking a risky step backwards. The COVID pandemic showed us, in my state, one of the first, actually the first in the nation known cases of a COVID 19 case.

And five years ago this month, some of the first deaths occurred in my state. Sadly, there were many more. And trust me, I came back here to Washington, D.C., and people talked as if business was usual, all the while it was spreading across my state.

Ultimately, this pandemic killed more than 1.2 million people, and it devastated our economy, it had an impact on our children's education, and it has long term health care effects on millions of survivors.

Now we are at the possibility of the beginning of another crisis, the avian flu. This crisis is yet another reminder of the importance of medical research and collaboration ... But these two stories were on the front page of the Seattle Times just yesterday, the cost of eggs skyrocketing, caused by the avian flu, and the proposed cuts to NIH.

Now, what do people not understand? Does it make sense to cut science at the time we might have another pandemic? Does it make sense to continue to cut the collaborative efforts of research? This Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory at Washington State University is on the front lines of the avian flu.

One of my institutions is on the front line. They test animals from across the state so they can be identified and stop the flu from spreading. And we want to cut those dollars?

Americans already see the impact of the avian flu every time they go to the grocery store, and now people in Seattle and Spokane are saying it costs \$7 for a dozen eggs. Some stores are limiting how many eggs you can buy.

So, as you can see, this issue is on the top of mind of constituents, and they want to know what kind of leadership we are going to provide here in Washington, D.C. to lower costs, particularly at the grocery store, but to also lower costs in health care. Putting someone in charge who is a skeptic of medical science in response to the avian flu is just wrong. It's a catastrophic mistake for America's health care.

Now, I'll admit my state is a global leader in medical innovation. From research, to biotech, to getting drugs to the market -- in 2023 the National Institutes of Health awarded \$1.2 billion in highly competitive grants to 65 different organizations in the State of Washington.

This supported about 12,000 jobs and generated close to \$3 billion in economic activity. So yes, we know a little something about global health and innovation. But we know something else, Mr. President, the kind of research we're talking about here is the kind that saves lives, and this ultimately, is about making an investment in saving the lives of people.

Last Friday, when the Trump administration announced it was reducing crucial funding for NIH grants, you're talking about our medical institutions that need this to build services and equipment [and] train the next generation of researchers.

For example, as I mentioned, Washington State University [with] avian flu, they actually help pay for backup generators. These generators keep the systems working in case of a power outage so the pathogens can't escape. So, if you cut the institution, and you cut the lab, who's going to pay for these overhead costs? Or will they have to cancel their research or stop training the PhD students?

So, this week, a court stepped in and blocked the NIH head count cuts for now, but believe me, people are afraid that their life's work will be gone.

At the University of Washington Medicine, they are testing treatments for kidney disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's and pediatric cancer. So, if the so-called DOGE cap goes into place, these are programs that will see a shortfall.

They tell me they have to stop admitting new patients to clinical trials, that they'll have to scale back. And we can't just start and stop medical research like a faucet. Once these people leave, the programs are stopped. It takes a long time to get them started. Once halted, the research data, the clinical trial, the patients, the laboratory, the equipment that led to those innovations -- will be lost.

Now the ask me, that is throwing taxpayer dollars away. When you have an opportunity to cure a disease that affects millions of people and can save taxpayers billions, but somebody is arbitrarily going to cut these NIH funds, thinking they're saving the American people? They're not saving them. They're causing harm.

Cutting NIH and scientific research funding have consequences for every state in this union. North Carolina is home of the famous research triangle and receives about \$2.2 billion [in] NIH funding. Texas is home of Baylor College of Medicine and receives about \$1.85 [billion] in NIH funding.

As a country, we should be working together to do more research, create more jobs and decide what are the lifesaving science and medical innovations that we want to invest in and are represented in a budget process here in the United States Senate -- not the arbitrary decisions of someone who hasn't even been elected to make these decisions.

But the risks don't stop at our medical labs. Republicans are proposing to cut \$2.3 trillion in federal Medicaid funding so the administration can afford to lower taxes on some of the most extreme wealthy Americans.

More than 1.8 million Washingtonians are enrolled in Apple Health, Washington's Medicaid program. So, that's one in six adults, two in five children, three in five nursing home residents, three in eight people with disabilities. I'm not confident, Mr. President, that Mr. Kennedy understands how critical this process is and the provisions of Medicaid are to people in my state.

We know that we had this debate before and only because a very small bipartisan group of senators helped save Medicaid from a crazy block grant idea that would have taken a very big building block out of our health care delivery system. Thanks to all my colleagues on this side, and those on that side, who stood up for that and said block granting was the wrong idea.

Well, believe me, they're at it again. There are those who think to give the tax break to corporations, somehow you're going to get it out of the hide of these very individuals that are counting on Medicaid.

I do not believe Mr. Kennedy will stand up to President Trump and be an advocate for those who rely on Medicaid. I know my constituents know what's at stake with this vote, and they know that our health care delivery system is about science, it is about innovation, it is about making the investments to keep Americans healthy. I urge my colleagues to vote no on this nomination, and I yield the floor.