She left the medical mainstream and rose to be RFK Jr.’s surgeon general pick

Casey Means, the surgeon general nominee, has criticized the medical establishment. She could be put in position to change it.

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By Lauren Weber and Rachel Roubein

Seven years ago, Casey Means was on a path to finishing up a highly competitive residency and becoming a well-paid surgeon. But she resigned, becoming a health products entrepreneur and popular online personality who has frequently suggested that Americans should question the advice they get from medical authorities.

“We are told to ‘trust the science,’” she wrote in her 2024 book, “Good Energy: The Surprising Connection Between Metabolism and Limitless Health.” “This obviously doesn’t make sense. We have been gaslighted to not ask questions over the past fifty years at the exact time chronic disease rates have exploded.”

As a best-selling author with more than 850,000 followers on her Instagram account, @drcaseyskitchen, she centers her message around the concept of “good energy,” which she defines as optimizing metabolic health. This idea suggests that maintaining a healthy lifestyle will ward off — and potentially treat — diseases.

Now Means, 38, is poised to become the next surgeon general of the United States, one of the nation’s most recognizable and trusted medical posts. There, her backers and critics believe, she will advance Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s “Make America Healthy Again” movement aimed at addressing childhood illness and chronic disease.

Several medical and scientific experts say she has portrayed healthy eating, an active lifestyle and using health-tracking devices as more powerful in reversing disease than scientific research has established. They are concerned she may use the surgeon general’s bully pulpit to amplify policy recommendations that are not grounded in evidence.

“RFK [Jr.] and Casey Means have a history of saying things in a direct and potentially misleading, often scientifically wrong way, which you can defend if you’re just saying it as Casey Means, or as RFK [Jr.], but are hard to defend if you’re saying that as the HHS secretary or as the surgeon general of the United States,” said Jerome M. Adams, who served as surgeon general during President Donald Trump’s first term and joined five other former surgeons general in an op-ed arguing Kennedy’s actions “are endangering the health of the nation.”

In a statement, the Department of Health and Human Services called Means a “world-class physician and scientist whose nomination as Surgeon General reflects her deep understanding of modern metabolic health and her fierce commitment to evidence-based care.”

Surgeons general have traditionally helped fight HIV, smoking, obesity, addiction and more. They oversee more than 6,000 uniformed public health personnel and are charged with issuing seminal reports with the latest medical research. They haven’t all been doctors — nurses and a veterinarian have temporarily filled the post — but typically come from the medical establishment.

Means rose through the ranks of top academic institutions, racking up accolades before pursuing a different career. She currently has a medical license in Oregon that she voluntarily placed in inactive status, according to the Oregon state medical board, which means she cannot practice medicine in the state as of the beginning of 2024. She holds no other licenses, according to the Federation of State Medical Boards.

As a key part of her message, Means wrote in her book that “the ability to prevent and reverse” a variety of ailments, including infertility and Alzheimer’s, “is under your control and simpler than you think.” She dedicates the book to her mother, who died of pancreatic cancer, calling it a “preventable metabolic condition.”

Medical experts say there is significant evidence that diet and exercise can lower the risk of some chronic conditions and slow the progression of other diseases, but some caution that Means goes too far when she says it can reverse many of them.

“For most diseases, there are very few absolutes, and the problem with a lot of our wellness advocates is they give people the impression that if you do some very simplistic things, you’ll avoid some very bad things,” said Georges C. Benjamin, a physician and longtime head of the American Public Health Association. “Tragically, life just isn’t that simple.”

At times, Means has promoted products outside of the medical mainstream. She has touted the products and services of companies that partnered with her on her book launch — including longevity supplements that cost $125 (which at one point offered a 10 percent off coupon code, CASEY). A Washington Post review of her financial disclosures reporting income from 2024 and into the summer of this year found she has been paid more than $536,000 for partnerships as well as for book-tour and newsletter sponsorships with companies the forms described as selling “diagnostic testing,” “herbal remedies and wellness products” and “teas, supplements, and elixirs.”

Legal and advertising experts The Post spoke to questioned whether her financial ties were adequately disclosed when she promoted the products.

“To think that it’s possible that someone with this kind of position could be engaged in false or deceptive marketing is absolutely concerning,” said Bonnie Patten, executive director of truthinadvertising.org, a consumer advocacy group.

HHS said Means will comply with all ethical requirements.

Her confirmation — which is expected in the coming months after Trump selected her in May — would further solidify the power and influence of Kennedy and the MAHA movement, half a dozen medical experts said, pushing aside traditional medical expertise.

Means’s backers say she has been early to document failures in the health care system for Americans disillusioned with it and is an effective communicator, making her well positioned to serve as the “nation’s doctor.”

“There’s almost a spiritual crisis happening in America,” Vani Hari, an author, activist and Kennedy ally known as Food Babe, said in an interview. “There’s this fierce battle of good vs. evil where these special interests — the pharmaceutical, the food and the chemical corporations — have largely controlled our government.”

Means was instrumental in catapulting Kennedy’s MAHA initiative, which has been galvanized by women who support his goals and who have become known as “MAHA moms.” On Fox News in May, Kennedy noted that Means was pregnant and said she has “a touchstone with every mother in this country.”

As surgeon general, Means would be charged with speaking to the American public with authority. Being a successful advocate, she has written, comes from communicating forcefully.

“People are attracted to a point of view, so ask yourself, ‘What are we adding to the internet with our take on this particular topic?’” she wrote in a 2021 blog post, “and be bold in communicating it through every bit of content you produce.”

This account of Means’s rise to surgeon general nominee is based on interviews with more than 35 colleagues, friends and medical experts and a review of her book, newsletters, social media, podcast appearances and other professional writings.

‘Good Energy’

Means’s best-selling book — which she wrote with her brother, Calley, a close Kennedy ally — now reads like a “Make America Healthy Again” manifesto.

It includes a chapter titled “Trust Yourself, Not Your Doctor.” She writes that ultra-processed foods should be avoided as if they were illicit drugs. She argues to ditch Lunchables, Heinz ketchup and Gatorade, and criticizes major food companies including Coca-Cola and Kraft.

In her “Good Energy” newsletter, Means has called ultra-processed foods “lifeless disease-causing Franken-foods that are exploiting and sickening humans and the planet for profit, and leeching our life force and our long-term joy.”

Nutritionists have applauded her focus on moving away from ultra-processed foods, which studies have identified as risk factors for obesity, heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Researchers are still trying to determine exactly why they are leading to poor health, but it has been complex and expensive to study the mass-produced, hyperpalatable products, according to several nutrition experts and former federal health officials.

Some researchers caution against demonizing all ultra-processed foods, which make up more than half of the calories Americans consume each day. Some foods, like candy and soft drinks, are worse than others, like some sliced breads and some peanut butters that can contain nutrients like fiber and protein, they say.

Means often invokes spirituality as underpinning the path to health. “Build your life on an unshakable foundation in service of unlocking your limitless potential as a lightning rod of spirit, and as a part of god,” she wrote in a newsletter. In her book, Means talks about taking psilocybin mushrooms.

Means did not mention vaccines, one of the most divisive issues within the MAHA movement, in her May 2024 book. But on prominent podcasts a few months later, she publicly questioned the cumulation of the childhood vaccine schedule and the hepatitis B vaccine. That echoes Kennedy, who founded a prominent anti-vaccine group and has reshaped U.S. vaccine policy, prompting an outcry from some medical experts who say the vaccine schedule is safe and effective.

“I bet that one vaccine probably isn’t causing autism, but what about the 20 that they are getting before 18 months?” Means said on Joe Rogan’s podcast last October.

Major medical associations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, say there is no link between vaccines and autism, pointing to reams of scientific data.

After Trump said he would nominate Means, some MAHA activists argued she was insufficiently devoted to opposing immunizations. The same issue haunted the White House’s first surgeon general nominee, Janette Nesheiwat, whose nomination was withdrawn in early May amid conservative criticism over questions about her medical credentials and past advocacy for coronavirus vaccines.

Calley Means, who has faced some of the same critiques as his sister, said it speaks to Casey’s ability to think for herself.

“Casey has been called anti-vaccine and too pro-vaccine,” he told The Post. “She’s been called an industry plant and a radical witch-doctor. She’s excelled at the highest levels of medicine and has also been called a traitor to that system.”

An evolution

Casey and Calley Means grew up in Washington, D.C., attending elite private high schools. They were raised Catholic with a strong spiritual grounding by parents who encouraged independent thinking, according to Calley. Their father worked on health and welfare programs in the Ford administration, at one point leading an effort to reform the food stamps program, according to his website.

Means has said she weighed over 200 pounds as an adolescent. She struggled with acne, painful menstrual cycles and low-grade anxiety. Magazines mistakenly led her to believe that low-fat foods could help solve her problems, she has said. After doing her own research on nutrition, she wrote in her book, she was able to lose the excess weight.

She continued to explore the topic at Stanford, majoring in human biology, and became passionate about nutrigenomics, the study of how genes and diet impact a person’s risk factors for disease. She would later serve as a Stanford lecturer teaching students about food and health. Over the years, she’s received academic honors, written scientific papers, as well as worked on research at the National Institutes of Health and at New York University Langone Medical Center, according to HHS and her website. She has also championed the medical humanities, the intersection of art and medicine.

She graduated from Stanford School of Medicine before starting at Oregon Health and Science University for a residency in otolaryngology — head and neck surgery — a top medical specialty.

But Means left toward the end of her residency in September 2018.

Means’s biography on her website says “ultimately, she felt so disillusioned with the practice and incentives of surgical care that she chose to resign and work on reform from outside the ‘system.’”

She left as the program “begged her to stay,” said Fiona Biles, who has been a close friend of Means for nearly 20 years, adding that Means was being recruited for surgical jobs that would have paid her hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“She felt a deep sense of futility as a surgeon and began looking for answers beyond the scalpel,” Biles said.

In her book, Means describes how the stress of residency affected her own health, writing how she suffered from chronic neck pain, depression and severe gastrointestinal problems.

Fellow resident Lauren Luk told The Post that Means expressed to her during her residency that she couldn't "keep hurting people if I'm not going to fix them." But Luk said that "surgery is not perfect, you know, it's not like you're going to get a cure every time."

Means wrote she had a "strong interest in complementary & alternative medicine," while writing to a nonprofit leader in 2017 in an email posted on her website, but "the last several years in a mainstream ENT residency have not allowed me to explore these modalities with patients."

Luk and another resident, Elizabeth Schimmel, also stressed that Means was smart, passionate and kind. Schimmel, who said she was friends with Means at the time, voiced concern in an interview with The Post that someone who did not finish residency could be the nation's top doctor: "You wouldn't want the head of the military to have dropped out of basic training."

Means's website was recently updated to list her numerous academic accomplishments and research background, as well as a list of her podcast appearances. "Means is considered controversial because her work challenges the economic and cultural foundations of U.S. healthcare, agriculture, and food systems," the website says as of early October.

The reaction among Means's family to her decision to leave residency was split. Her brother, Calley Means, said he was concerned at the time that Casey was ruining her life. He now believes it was a "bold decision" that changed his own life, he told The Post.

Her parents threw her a party, she recalled on Tucker Carlson's podcast last year.

She went on to launch her own "functional medicine and wellness consulting" practice called Means Health, as described in Oregon Secretary of State documents.

"I do not replace the valuable role of your Primary Care Provider or specialists, but aim to supplement their conventional care with a comprehensive plan of safe, natural, and holistic therapies to help your unique body and physiology return to optimal functioning," Means wrote on a 2019 version of her practice's website where she detailed that she saw patients with pain, autoimmune issues and a variety of other maladies.

Supporters of the functional medicine field say it's a way of tackling the chronic disease epidemic that focuses on a holistic, lifestyle intervention approach to the root causes of disease.

The field is not recognized as a specialty certified by the American Board of Medical Specialties, and some medical critics contend it can result in over-testing and fringe treatments.

“I think new ideas in medicine are very hard to include in the paradigm,” said Mark Hyman, a Kennedy ally who was a founding director for the Cleveland Clinic Center for Functional Medicine. He said he believes criticism will “fall by the wayside over time as more and more evidence is created and published.”

Means on her website describes wanting to scale the reach of functional medicine and began circulating a concept called “Labracadabra,” which would use “existing lab information from routine blood work as an educational biofeedback tool to empower patients to understand their health.”

Means’s brother connected her with the people behind Levels, a health tech company. She went on to become a co-founder and chief medical officer. The company promotes continuous glucose monitors, which are traditionally used by diabetics to monitor their blood sugar, for nondiabetics or prediabetics. A subscription to the company’s app along with lab testing and access to the monitors can cost hundreds of dollars.

“I believe CGM is the most powerful technology for generating the data and awareness to rectify our Bad Energy crisis in the Western world,” Means wrote in her book.

Kennedy has promoted biowearables, including continuous glucose monitors. In 2024, the Food and Drug Administration cleared the first over-the-counter device for both diabetics and nondiabetics, saying they “can be a powerful tool” to give people more information about their health.

The American Association of Clinical Endocrinology does not recommend them for people without diabetes or for those with prediabetes.

The group’s president, Scott Isaacs, said in an email that there wasn’t “strong scientific evidence” to do so. “Most studies have been small and exploratory, and while it can be interesting to see how your blood sugar changes after meals or exercise, these numbers only tell part of the story about your overall health.”

Levels also served as a launchpad for Means.

“The long-term vision is for Casey’s personal brand to be [a] critical piece of the Levels overall marketing and brand awareness strategy,” according to a Levels job listing. “Much in the way that public scientists and doctors like Mark Hyman, Andrew Huberman, and David Sinclair have built significant audiences and distribution channels, we believe there is a huge opportunity for Casey to be the leading public voice in Metabolic Health.”

Means resigned from the company as chief medical officer in the winter of 2023 and focused on promoting her book, according to her website. Her ethics forms say she became an adviser and will resign from that post if confirmed.

Partnership questions

Means has, at times, blurred sponsorship lines when talking about supplements and other products, legal and advertising experts told The Post. She has said she only promotes products that she researches herself.

Means did a YouTube video titled “Unbox My Genova Metabolomix+ Nutrition Test With Me! 💉” about a test that can cost hundreds of dollars. Genova Diagnostics is a sponsor of her book tour and newsletter, according to her financial disclosures, for $20,000 and listed as a partner of her book launch on her website. She did not expressly disclose that connection in the video, but did note viewers could get 10 percent off in the description. She also did not disclose the partnership in a May 2024 newsletter when she promoted the brand.

Means said she takes longevity supplements from the brand Timeline for “mitochondrial health” without identifying them as a book-launch partner in a June 2024 newsletter. The link she included previously took the reader to a URL that identifies her as a partner for the brand. Amazentis SA, the parent company of Timeline, paid Means more than $134,000 for newsletter sponsorship, partnership fees and book-tour sponsorship, according to her disclosure forms.

Both companies did not respond to requests for comment.

Some legal and advertising experts said these instances raise questions about whether Means clearly disclosed her ties to the brands, as required by Federal Trade Commission guidelines.

“FTC guidelines would say she should be disclosing when she promotes them,” said Rebecca Tushnet, a professor at Harvard Law School who focuses on false advertising.

In a statement, HHS said: “As Surgeon General, Dr. Means will comply with all ethical requirements, which is standard for any Presidential appointee.”

Past surgeons general have come under fire for their financial ties. Vivek H. Murthy, who served as both Barack Obama and Joe Biden’s surgeon general, received criticism for serving as a coronavirus consultant to cruise lines and other industries while advising Biden’s campaign.

Means’s ethics disclosures detail her plans to comply. “Upon my confirmation, I will stop producing my newsletter and monetized social media posts,” she wrote.

Not posted on Means's website is "Newsletter #40: ✨ 🎁 Dr. Casey's healthy gift guide," which The Post accessed through internet archives. The guide from December links to products from at least three companies that partnered with her, without disclosing her partnership. It's unclear when it was removed from her website this year.

Means's website has been updated to address some of the criticisms that had ricocheted online after her nomination

"She has been criticized for being an 'influencer,'" it states, "and widely labeled as such as a response to having sponsors which support her newsletter and for whom she has shared marketing links."