

From TV Doctor to Power Broker: Dr. Oz Thrives on Trump's Team

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Summary by Bloomberg AI

- Mehmet Oz has been loyal to Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. while cultivating a close relationship with President Donald Trump and a reputation as a serious operator in the administration.
- Oz has been playing a significant role in the administration, with access to the president and involvement in various policy discussions, leading to speculation that he could be the heir apparent to lead the health department if Kennedy departs.
- Despite potential challenges and criticisms, Oz has earned respect from some outside the administration, including major healthcare companies and industry groups, and has been working to implement the administration's health policies and reduce healthcare costs.

Mehmet Oz has happily spent recent months touting negotiations with drug manufacturers and seeking to root out fraud driving up federal spending on healthcare. All the while, he's been scrupulously loyal to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Health and Human Services Secretary.

Behind the scenes, Oz declined to make a play for the top US health job as the White House **overhauled** the agency's leadership earlier this year, according to people familiar with the discussions.

As Kennedy's health department has been roiled by **pervasive management issues** and **chaotic policy rollouts**, chatter across Washington has intensified over how long the controversial health chief has in the job.

Oz, meanwhile, has cultivated not only a close relationship with President Donald Trump, but a reputation as a surprisingly serious operator in an administration where few have translated their outside celebrity to bureaucratic competence or job security. As a result, there's a growing perception that the 66-year-old administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has become the heir apparent to lead the health department if Kennedy departs.

“Most of Washington is people fighting for credit. What Oz realizes is everything goes to the president. He’s not fighting over turf, he’s comfortable in his skin,” said Adam Boehler, the administration’s special presidential envoy for hostage affairs and a former CMS official during Trump’s first term.

People familiar with the dynamics do not expect a change in leadership atop the health department at least through the midterm elections in November, but said it’s unclear whether changes are possible afterward. Still, it’s impossible to avoid the outsize role that Oz is playing in the administration, enjoying more access to the president than any CMS administrator in recent history.

While nobody is a peer of the president, Oz comes close. Both are wealthy television stars of the early 2000s with degrees from the University of Pennsylvania who became regulars on the Palm Beach social scene before entering Republican politics.

As a member of Trump’s administration, Oz’s remit has been sprawling, according to people familiar with the matter.

He shaped the administration’s attempt to pare back the **childhood vaccination** schedule and its move to **reschedule marijuana** — policies that have little to do with his portfolio. He was involved in discussions about a potential pathway to rejoin the World Health Organization and chatted with its leader on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum **in Davos**.

He was part of a panel that interviewed candidates to lead the Food and Drug Administration. And in February, when the White House revamped the department’s leadership, Oz voiced support for Kennedy and proposed addressing concerns by bringing in a former top Department of Government Efficiency official to make tough decisions with a more impartial eye, one of the people said.

This account of Oz’s tenure is based on more than 40 interviews, including with current and former administration officials, company executives, outside advisers, staff on Capitol Hill and policy experts. Oz said in a rare sit-down interview he hasn’t decided what to do with his future yet, but he committed to Trump to serve his full term.

“He said, ‘OK, I’ll give you the job, but I am going to insist on four years,’ and I committed to him on that,” Oz said.

White House spokesman Kush Desai called Oz an “instrumental asset” in delivering on the president’s agenda. “Under President Trump, HHS is finally at the forefront of Making Americans Healthy Again and driving down healthcare and prescription drug costs. This historic turnaround would not be possible without the stalwart leadership and experience of the entire HHS team,” Desai said in a statement.

In many ways, the Trump administration's sweeping changes to health policy were born in Oz's backyard.

He has a 10-bedroom mansion in Palm Beach complete with an outdoor pool, tennis court and — most importantly — proximity to Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort. It became a crash pad of sorts during the transition, with high-level aides filtering in and out as they selected staff to overhaul the government. Between talking personnel and policy, Kennedy and Oz forged a friendship.

A former TV host made famous by Oprah Winfrey, Oz may have been an obvious pick for surgeon general, the doctor responsible for communicating health information to the public. But he instead raised his hand to run Medicare and Medicaid, the US government health insurance programs for the elderly, low-income and disabled. He said he wanted to wield the power of the purse — the federal government spent \$988 billion for Medicare alone last year — to drive policy change.

Trump asked him if he was sure he wanted such a tough job.

"He goes, 'This is not like television. This is like a lot of work,'" Oz recalled. "I said, 'I know, I want to do this job.'"

Even as Washington is speculating about possible succession drama, Kennedy and Oz have maintained a close relationship.

For one, Kennedy may not be going anywhere.

He's denied that he plans to leave the administration or run for president again. And while Trump removed other Cabinet officials causing political headaches, Kennedy is viewed as offering unique upside in his appeal to independent voters. Administration officials have instead sought to **guide Kennedy** toward a focus on popular initiatives that appeal to voters and bring on operational muscle to help run the day-to-day management of the department.

Oz has been careful to not run afoul of Kennedy and avoid undercutting his boss. Kennedy trusts Oz, isn't threatened by him and genuinely seeks his opinion on a broad range of issues, people familiar with the dynamics said.

"Mehmet is a trusted friend, a tireless public servant, and an outstanding CMS Administrator. He is driving President Trump's Make America Healthy Again agenda with urgency, integrity, and a relentless focus on delivering better health outcomes for the American people. I'm proud to have him on my team and grateful for his leadership," Kennedy said in a statement.

Still, when Trump wants a goal accomplished, he'll often call both Oz and Kennedy, according to people familiar with the matter. Oz was one of just a few administration officials to fill in while White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt was on maternity leave, elevated alongside possible 2028 presidential candidates in Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Oz is also boosted by a net worth that ranks among the top tier of Trump's senior staff, putting him on the same level as Cabinet members who impress the president with their business acumen.

On some days, Oz works as an intermediary between Kennedy and the White House, seeking to massage areas of disagreement or helping coach Kennedy on political dynamics. On others, he'll spearhead efforts to figure out how to turn requests from the president into actual government policy.

At a visit to a Florida retirement community in May, Trump joked about deferring to Oz to figure out how to implement Medicare and Medicaid policy.

"All I want to do is take care of you. I don't care. I said, 'You work out the details,'" the president said. Kennedy, for instance, was initially reluctant to back a push to cover weight-loss medications for older Americans on Medicare. He'd previously expressed skepticism around GLP-1 drugs like Wegovy and Ozempic made by Danish pharmaceutical giant Novo Nordisk A/S.

"Perhaps we should consider replanting the kitchen garden before sending more money to Denmark," Kennedy [posted](#) on social media in 2024.

But advisers, including Oz, made the case that weight-loss medications could be part of a more balanced approach to promote a healthy lifestyle. Kennedy got on board with the plan, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Balancing his relationships with both Trump and Kennedy takes skillful navigation. But winning over the career staff at CMS may have been an even taller challenge for Oz.

While his career as a TV doctor is an asset in the West Wing, his past decisions to promote unproven supplements didn't inspire confidence among skeptics in Washington that he was ready to take over the largest payer for healthcare services in America. Nor did his ill-fated 2022 run for US Senate in Pennsylvania, best remembered for a tone-deaf video about [shopping for crudités](#).

But unlike the broader Department of Health and Human Services, which has been destabilized by turnover in leadership, abrupt departures and allegations of [ethical misconduct](#), Oz has maintained relative stability among his senior leadership team. While his senior aides are an unorthodox blend of

Washington veterans, executives from the business world, academics and young talent with ties to Trump's orbit, he's also gone out of his way to seek out and listen to career staff.

Oz invites disagreement and is open-minded enough that sometimes his political staff has to intervene to steer him toward traditional Republican positions, according to people familiar with the inner workings of the department who were not authorized to detail private conversations.

It also helps that he has a medical background as an accomplished surgeon and longtime professor at Columbia University's medical school.

He also makes an unusual effort to elevate his staff, often appearing onstage with top aides, co-writing op-eds and tapping them for speaking roles at prominent events. During a recent press conference at the health department's headquarters, he served as a human easel, holding up posters emblazoned with charts while one of his deputies spoke.

Oz says the effort to cultivate and champion his staff is deliberate, and has helped win voluntary commitments from drugmakers, tech companies and health insurers to lower costs for the government and cut red tape.

"They've got their team of attack tigers, and we've got our team," Oz said. Successful negotiations, he said, only come when "they have to respect your capabilities."

Oz has also earned begrudging respect from those outside the administration. He's engendered cautious optimism from major healthcare companies and industry groups that interact with CMS by signaling he's open to a less adversarial regulatory process.

"They are very open to the idea, if you provide your solution to the problem," said John Whyte, the chief executive officer of the American Medical Association who's known Oz for more than two decades.

Oz has parlayed his geniality — and the relationships he made with Senate Republicans during his unsuccessful campaign — to reach Republican lawmakers on Capitol Hill. He served as a point of contact for some GOP lawmakers during negotiations over Trump's signature tax and domestic policy legislation last summer, according to people familiar with the discussions.

He even gets praise from people of different political stripes, including Mark Cuban, the billionaire sports and media mogul who co-founded a healthcare company and backed Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris in the 2024 election. He and Oz played against each other in the 2010 NBA All-Star

Celebrity Game; more recently, his Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drug Company partnered with the administration's discount drug platform.

"I like Oz. Good man. Smart. And I truly believe he is putting patients first," Cuban wrote in an email.

That's not to say Oz hasn't ruffled feathers.

CMS floated a proposal to **limit payments** to privatized Medicare insurance plans only to ultimately back down under industry pressure. Another proposal to voluntarily convince health insurers to finance coverage of weight-loss medications failed to gain enough support to get off the ground, leaving the government potentially **holding the bag** for billions of dollars next year.

Oz says he remains hopeful he can convince companies to come to the administration's position without the threat of regulation.

"My job could be to spank you, and hurt you, and crush you because you're a bad person inherently, or to help you do such a good job you don't make missteps that make us all look bad. I feel like I'm in the second camp," Oz said.

That engagement has upset some Kennedy adherents skeptical of the drug industry. A **drug-pricing deal** struck with Pfizer Inc. incensed supporters who revile the company for its role manufacturing Covid-19 vaccines.

Oz said he was just doing what the president wanted, and that securing affordable medications was still a necessary goal.

"I know there's frustration around why we have to work with pharma at all," Oz said on a Zoom call with Kennedy supporters.

Kennedy's approach to public health has also drawn plenty of criticism, and recent outbreaks of **Ebola**, New World **screwworm**, **measles** and foodborne **parasites** have only intensified scrutiny of the Trump administration's health policies. For Oz in particular, some of the most difficult battles are yet to come.

The policies Oz championed in the tax law are estimated to cause 10 million people to lose insurance through 2034, **congressional analysts estimate**. Implementation is a herculean bureaucratic challenge, and Democrats will be eager to pounce on any missteps.

Millions of people on Medicaid are facing new **requirements to work**, go to school or volunteer to keep their health insurance starting in January. When state governments have implemented similar programs in the past, enrollment slowed or decreased — including among people who should still qualify.

“Will there be people who fall through the cracks? Yes, and so we’re designing mechanisms to catch them,” Oz said.

Some critics have also **panned the administration’s deals** with drug manufacturers as overblown, arguing many of the price cuts on a Trump-branded website match already available discounts or have minimal benefit for patients who have health insurance. The arrangements have however altered drug-pricing dynamics abroad for companies and foreign governments.

“Certainly the next few years will be challenging in terms of the things that have to be implemented,” Whyte said.

Those closest to Oz acknowledge his ambition. Michael Roizen, a physician who worked as a medical adviser on Oz’s television show and co-authored books with him, says Oz has long seen politics as a tool to make people healthier.

“Early on, I asked him, ‘What’s your ultimate goal?’” Roizen recalls. “He said his goal was to somehow get the president leading the effort to get people healthy so they can enjoy life.”

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