



## When Scientific Arguments Obscure Moral Ones, Democracy Suffers

**Gwen Ottinger**, Drexel University

When U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth **announced** last month that military personnel would no longer be required to get the flu vaccine, public health experts **criticized** the policy change, arguing that it would result in more cases of serious illness and undermine force readiness. They took the opportunity to reiterate that vaccines are safe and effective, a fact that has been famously (though inconsistently) **questioned** by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

But Hegseth didn't attack vaccines or reject science. He asserted that **personal freedoms**, including religious liberty and bodily autonomy, were of utmost importance. While not disclaiming the goal of preventing illness — vaccines will still be available to service members — he ranked it second to his vision of freedom. This is where the disagreement between the Pentagon and public health experts really lies: Hegseth's critics see protecting population health as paramount and safeguarding bodily autonomy as secondary.