

VIEWPOINT

Trump's Banned Words and Disastrous Health Policies

JOSEPH J. AMON

Nearly 60 years ago, comedian Lenny Bruce was arrested for saying “forbidden” words in his stand-up show.¹ A few years later, George Carlin carried on the tradition and was arrested for a routine on the “seven words you can’t say on television.”²

What was transgressive then, and what subjected Bruce and Carlin to arrest, is less than shocking today and has, with the election of Donald J. Trump as US president, become normalized and transformed into what has been called “middle-finger politics.”³

A big difference, though, is that the words Bruce and Carlin used, which may have offended the conscience of many people (although limited to those paying to see their shows), were not part of a political circus seeking to erase the identities and restrict the human rights and civil liberties of millions of Americans, as well as hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide.⁴

Since his inauguration, President Trump has launched a blizzard of executive orders upending government programs affecting science, public health, the environment, trade, education, sports, and more. As part of these efforts, he has authorized a new list of banned words: gender, transgender, pregnant person, pregnant people, LGBT, transsexual, non-binary, nonbinary, assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth, biologically male, and biologically female.⁵

These are words that Trump demanded be eliminated from the US Centers for Disease Control’s website, erasing not only identities but also critical information on the health status and health inequities of often vulnerable populations. The orders also limit the ability of public health professionals, within the US government and outside of it, to implement programs and conduct research to ensure that everyone’s health needs are met.

On its face, this campaign seems ludicrous and laughable: as archaic as the trumped-up charges against Bruce and Carlin. Have we really stepped back in time to a world where the police, or the US president, is policing language?

The obvious answer is yes, we have.

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But this effort is clearly much greater, and much more powerful, than a couple of comedians pressing against the boundaries of quaint, and often hypocritical, social conventions. Trump's campaign against these words is part of a much larger effort to upend public health and health care in the United States and globally. It is as much a war against words as it is a war against science and against the progress that has been made over decades building global partnerships to advance the right to health.

Global health and human rights

To understand more of Trump's global impact on health, we need look no further than a news article published on February 3 in *The Standard*, a Kenyan newspaper. The article reported that the United States Agency for International Development had suspended the supply of HIV antiretroviral medicines to the Kenya Medical Supplies Authority "until further notice."⁶ Kenya has approximately 1.4 million people living with HIV and, with the support of internationally funded HIV prevention and treatment programs, has seen a sharp decline in new infections, falling from 270,000 new infections in 1992 to 21,000 in 2023.⁷ The continuing success of these programs is now at risk.

The nonprofit research organization amfAR estimated that globally the US PEPFAR program supports 271,229 health workers who deliver new supplies of antiretroviral drugs to 222,333 people every day.⁸ Among those being reached are 679,936 pregnant people living with HIV and receiving antiretroviral treatment for their own health and to prevent transmission to their children. The organization forecast that during the 90-day US stop-work order, 135,987 babies would acquire HIV. Making matters worse, these children would likely go undiagnosed because infant HIV testing services are also being suspended. Every day of the work stoppage an estimated 1,471 infants would be infected.

Thankfully, two weeks after the announcement of a 90-day "pause" for all US foreign assistance, the US Department of State issued a memo allow-

ing "life-saving HIV care and treatment services," "prevention of mother-to-child transmission services," and payment of "reasonable" administrative costs to continue. Confusion reigns, however, about the details of what is permitted, and funding reportedly remains blocked. The amfAR report also highlighted the stop-work order's impact on critically important public health programs that were related to HIV but were not strictly treatment programs. For example, in 2024, PEPFAR provided post-violence care to more than 1.3 million people, or more than 3,600 survivors of domestic and sexual violence every day, including by providing rape kits, HIV testing, post-exposure prophylaxis, and other essential services. These programs are stalled.

Malaria programs have also been affected. In Kenya, 70% of the population is considered at risk of malaria, and more than six million people are affected each year, mostly children under five years of age and pregnant people.⁹ Recent progress against malaria has come from a new vaccine developed over the past four decades through work by the US government's Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and National Institutes of Health, in partnership with the pharmaceutical company GSK, the nonprofit organization PATH, and the Gates Foundation, among others. It has reduced cases of severe malaria and child deaths and increased health care access for children more broadly.¹⁰ Few Americans are likely aware that malaria was endemic in parts of the United States until 1950; but as climate change advances, what are now rare cases of transmission may become more common.¹¹

Malaria programs throughout sub-Saharan Africa have shut down mosquito control efforts and suspended shipments of bed nets to protect people from malaria because of Trump's orders. Programs to end maternal mortality lack medicines to stop hemorrhages. Inexpensive treatments, such as oral rehydration salts that treat life-threatening diarrhea, are not being delivered through health systems because of stop-work orders issued by the Trump administration.

Clinical trials have been suspended. Family planning programs halted. While there have been announcements that exemptions exist for some

programs, again confusion reigns, resulting in paralysis as program implementers wait for clarity on whether the exemptions apply to their programs. Meanwhile, thousands of staff experts in these programs and in how to navigate the communities where they are implemented have been furloughed or fired. In Bangladesh, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research has laid off more than 1,000 employees.¹²

Right to health in the United States

These actions “pausing” aid internationally might seem to be consistent with Trump’s campaign slogan of “America First.” But are they?

Trump’s recent executive orders and the actions of his administration also imperil the health of all Americans. Withdrawing the country from the World Health Organization will interfere with its ability to defend the United States against future pandemics. Withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change makes us more vulnerable to the climate-related catastrophes measured in lives and in GDP that are already occurring. Ending diversity, equity, and inclusion programs makes it harder for public health workers to represent and work with the communities they serve and to fight back against misinformation and disinformation.¹³ For Trump, who has proposed the blatantly unqualified, anti-science, conspiracy-minded Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, that may be intentional. But the impact on Americans, especially those most vulnerable, is inescapable, and affects the enjoyment of the right to equality and nondiscrimination, the right to information and to science, and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

Trump’s orders have especially affected the rights of LGBTQ+ Americans. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, particularly transgender people, was getting worse in the United States well before Trump came into office, with some states passing legislation limiting the rights of transgender individuals, especially children. These

laws included restrictions on access to bathrooms, participation in sports, and any discussion of gender and sexuality in schools.¹⁴ As of 2023, 22 states had banned at least some form of gender-affirming health care for children, and five had laws classifying gender-affirming care as a felony.¹⁵

These policies contradict protections under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. As noted by the United Nations Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity following a 2022 visit to the United States, “these actions rely on prejudiced and stigmatizing views of LGBT persons, in particular transgender children and youth, and seek to leverage their lives as props for political profit.”¹⁶

The right to information on gender and sexuality has also been repeatedly restricted in the United States through bans on educational materials and books in schools and libraries. These bans violate the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and erase the visibility of transgender individuals.¹⁷

Prior to Trump’s second term, lawmakers in many US states were already attempting to prohibit transgender people from expressing their gender identity by preventing them from sharing their pronouns and restricting discussions of gender identity and these were among the first steps taken by Trump across all federal agencies after he assumed office.¹⁸

The right to benefit from scientific progress has also been upended by Trump’s actions, impacting the right to health in the United States and globally. Trump’s actions to strip the Centers for Disease Control’s website of information on LGBTQ+ health and to prohibit the collection of information that includes the self-identification of people’s gender identity impedes our understanding of US and global public health challenges and successes. The denial of gender-affirming care for transgender individuals also violates the rights to

health and privacy and can deny the rights to security of person, life, and freedom from cruel and degrading treatment.

Conclusion

The words used by Bruce and Carlin harmed no one, and the comedians' use of them was to call out hypocrisy and make America a more honest, open, and free country. Trump's forbidden words deny reality and demonstrate ignorance. We should follow in the comedians' vein by using them loudly, openly, and in defense of human rights.

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