

Don't Let Ideology Trump Science

The moralizers are trying to muck with U.S. science again. A flurry of activity over the past few weeks has followed the effort of a right-wing religious group to call into question almost 200 National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants focusing on behavioral and social aspects of issues such as sexuality, HIV/AIDS transmission, and drug abuse (*Science*, 31 October 2003, p. 758). This incident could have been written off as noise by a fringe group had it not come almost on the heels of the near-passage in the House of Representatives last July of what came to be known as the “Toomey Amendment,” after its author Rep. Patrick Toomey (R-PA). By a vote of 212 to 210, the House just missed defunding four NIH research grants on sexual behavior that had already been through rigorous scientific peer review and approval by NIH Institute National Advisory Councils (*Science*, 18 July 2003, p. 289).

This is not the first time that the scientific enterprise has been threatened by political or ideological intervention, nor will it be the last. Many of us recall, for example, Sen. William Proxmire’s grandstanding “Golden Fleece Awards” in the 1970s and 1980s. They were passed out with much media fanfare to research projects with titles Proxmire considered silly, and which were therefore ridiculed as a frivolous waste of the taxpayer’s money. Of course, the Golden Fleece “awardees” often turned out later to be important and useful projects. One example is the study of the physical characteristics of flight attendants that ultimately led to the development of life-saving safety belt configurations for them.

We are not concerned that Congress wishes to exert oversight over the U.S. research agenda and research priorities. That is their job, and we want our representatives to do it well. We also believe that the scientific community should be fully accountable to the public, because much science is publicly funded and the public is the ultimate beneficiary of our work. By nature, science is an open enterprise that invites examination and criticism—and more often than not, it is actually strengthened by public scrutiny. Oversight bolsters public confidence in the scientific enterprise and provides incentives for scientists to interact with the public, explain the importance of their research, and spread an ethic of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking that helps make our society more innovative and dynamic.

On occasions like the present one, however, healthy scrutiny gives way to irresponsible attack. The recent assaults on science were not directed at broad research questions or national research priorities. Instead, they were aimed at imposing ideology and religious doctrine on the awarding of individual research grants, intervening in and thereby subverting the scientific peer review system that has served both science and national needs so well.

The moral judges who are doing this don’t like the fact that HIV is spread through sexual contact, and they believe that drug addicts have made bad personal choices that have led to addiction. Is their disapproval of these behaviors a justification for stifling research on the diseases that result? Do they suppose that some form of national denial will make these problems go away? Regardless of personal feelings about the etiology of these illnesses, we need to understand their causes and transmission patterns if we are ever to get a handle on some of society’s most pervasive public health problems.

Whenever science is attacked on ideological grounds, its integrity and usefulness are threatened. Society cannot afford for moralistic dogma to replace scientific judgment when the public’s welfare is at stake. We have all been heartened in the past few weeks by the responses of many scientific and academic organizations [including the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)] and by the protests of many people who have written to defend science in the popular press. But rising up in protest as a community after the fact can only protect us for a while. Retaining control of the integrity of our enterprise requires that we engage more regularly and broadly with the public. Our objectives and strategies should be made more transparent to our fellow citizens, and we must expand our efforts to educate both policy-makers and the broader public about how science works. Science has served society well in tackling some of the world’s greatest problems, but only as long as it has evaded capture by narrow-minded interests.

Alan I. Leshner

Alan I. Leshner is chief executive officer of AAAS and executive publisher of *Science*.

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