

Advice Without Dissent

The Bush administration has made some unwise recent moves that undermine the process by which scientists provide advice to the U.S. government. The applicable current law (the Federal Advisory Committee Act), which requires these advisory bodies to “. . . be fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented and . . . not be inappropriately influenced by the appointing authority or by any special interest,” is more than empty boilerplate. Those of us who have served on these committees, or who have been the recipients of their advice, know that a variety of perspectives is key to a successful advisory panel. The national system of advisory committees plays a vital role in developing and guiding the federal government’s science policy. It is the primary mechanism for government agencies to harness the wisdom and expertise of the scientific community in shaping the national agenda for both research and regulation. For many federal agencies, particularly those focusing on medicine and health, advisory committees are chartered to address the most challenging and contentious scientific issues. They are challenging because of the inevitable uncertainty in applying the results of many different types of laboratory and epidemiological studies involving human beings to clinical medicine and public health decisions and regulations. And they are contentious because of the conflicts in values, both moral and economic, that arise in setting federal health and science policy.

According to the *Washington Post*, a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) spokesperson asserted Secretary Tommy Thompson’s prerogative to hear preferentially from experts who share the president’s philosophical sensibilities. Here is what the secretary has done:

1) To avoid getting advice that is discordant with the administration’s political agenda, the secretary disbanded the National Human Research Protections Advisory Committee and DHHS’s Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing, both of which were attempting to craft solutions to the complex problems accompanying genetic testing and research; solutions that apparently conflicted with the religious views of certain political constituencies.

2) To ensure that the department would get no unwanted advice from its environmental health advisory committees, the secretary has stacked them with scientists long affiliated with polluting industries. Fifteen of the 18 members of the Advisory Committee to the Director of the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) have been replaced, many with scientists that have long been associated with the chemical or petroleum industries, often in leadership positions of organizations opposing public health and environmental regulation. Similarly, the secretary has appointed industry-supported scientists to DHHS’s Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, threatening a planned review by the committee of whether the Centers for Disease Control’s definition of “elevated blood lead levels” in children is sufficiently protective.

Sadly, the secretary has it wrong. Scientific advisory committees do not exist to tell the secretary what he wants to hear but to help the secretary, and the nation, address complex issues. Every administration advances its agenda by making political appointments of scientists and managers to direct its agencies. But disbanding and stacking these public committees out of fear that they may offer advice that conflicts with administration policies devalues the entire federal advisory committee structure and the work of dedicated scientists who are willing to participate in these efforts. Previous administrations have recognized this and have generally worked hard to ensure balance. To cite one example, scientists employed by Exxon, Monsanto, DuPont, General Motors, and the Chemical Industry Institute of Technology have long served on the Environmental Protection Agency’s Science Advisory Board, along with others from the World Wildlife Fund and the American Lung Association. Although deliberations of environmental health advisory committees have not always reached consensus, the differences expressed make important contributions to the agencies’ work.

Instead of grappling with scientific ambiguity and shaping public policy using the best available evidence (the fundamental principle underlying public health and environmental regulation), we can now expect these committees to emphasize the uncertainties of health and environmental risks, supporting the administration’s antiregulatory views. And in those areas where there are deeply held conflicts in values, we can expect only silence. Regulatory paralysis appears to be the goal here, rather than the application of honest balanced science.

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