Science, politics, and public health

T
here is an idea on the part of scientists that politics is dirty, and a companion idea on the part of politi-
cians that science, by its continual qualifications and revisions, is, if not irrelevant, then at least out
of touch with the constraints of a democracy: What seems optimal from the perspective of science may
be impossible to implement in the political arena.

The events of the past several months regarding the
 coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic make it
apparent that for public health to continue to im-
prove the lives of everyone, we must find ways to over-
come this mutual distrust.

When I was director of the U.S. Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention (CDC) from 1990 to mid-1993—
an appointee of the George H. W. Bush
administration—the nation and the
world were facing a major and growing
public health crisis: increasing disease
and death from HIV/AIDS. The AIDS
epidemic had been raging for a deca-
de, and the scientific and biomedical com-
munities were staunchly advancing our
understanding of the disease and its
prevention and treatment, at the indi-
vidual and the population level. There
were still many unknowns about HIV/
AIDS, and the uncertainties about
how to tackle it effectively, both medi-
cally and socially, made policy-making
fraught with challenges.

Among those challenges was the fact
that the disease particularly hit marginalized groups in
the population. There were major controversies about
the safety of the blood supply, about condom dis-
tribution and needle exchange programs, and about how
to deal with HIV-infected health care workers.

The biomedical community felt that science and
scientists should be making the decisions regarding
public health—in other words, “getting politics out of
public health.” Policy-makers said that these decisions
should not be left to unelected public health experts.

Many of those same sentiments are being voiced
today, during the COVID-19 pandemic. What’s worse
now is that many in Washington, DC, and around the
country seem to scorn even the idea of scientific ex-
erts. The fact is that each group needs the other—
science without politics is impotent, and politics with-
out science is subject to whim and caprice.

In previous decades, the CDC’s role in national and
global public health was vital. There were very sub-
stantial infectious disease threats—emerging and
reemerging—plus growing noninfectious disease chal-
enges, including cancer, heart disease, obesity, to-

tabacco use, environmental and occupational issues, and
the mounting problems of injury and violence. Each of
these had complicated overlays of science and politics,
and included complex economic and cultural impacts.

And yet, it is as true today as it was then that the
CDC and the other U.S. public health agencies are not
infallible. That is especially true regarding new dis-
eases, those without an existing body of knowledge.
Early pronouncements often need to be revisited, and
frequently revised, as new discoveries are made.

This year, the CDC has been off the
mark more than once and has had to
reverse its recommendations. But
the solution to this reality is not to belittle
and tear down this hugely important
agency, but rather to continue the quest
for more and better scientific knowl-
edge, and to be willing to implement
those insights. But there have been re-
peated reports of political folks pushing
the CDC to alter their scientific judg-
ments to fit a political agenda.

Politicians should use the product
of the scientific process to make care-
ful policy and to design programs that
benefit the public’s health. And scientists should avoid
being drawn into the political fray and being used to try
to influence elections. Calling for this mutual respect
and joint involvement in the public health process may
seem naïve—especially in the wake of the recent sci-
entific problems at the CDC, and also at a time of hyperpo-
litical division and unprecedented election-year chaos.

As a first step, we must recognize the legitimate roles
that science and politics must have in our public health
processes. And then with real transparency and ac-
countability, we should vigorously debate how best to
meet the challenges before us.

Every American—whether scientist or layperson,
whether Republican, Democrat, or Independent—has a
stake in getting this science–politics balance right. It is
far too important for game playing.

—William Roper

William L. Roper

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