On Denialism, Skepticism and Science.

December 2, 2009 By Paul Dalton

Interesting juxtaposition in today's New York Times about the perils of politicizing science. While I believe that virtually nothing can be exempted from political meaning and influence, these two quite different cases illustrate the peril of allowing political agendas to drive scientific endeavors.

The first article is about South African President Jacob Zuma announcing new measures to combat HIV in its epicenter. The actions themselves would be less noteworthy (but still laudable), if not for the deadly dance with denialism of South Africa's previous President Thabo Mbeki.

Mbeki embraced the thinking of the disparate and desperate group we call AIDS denialists. This club-led by folks like Nobel Laureate gone soft in the head Peter Duesberg, snake oil salesman Matthias Rath and criminally negligent child-killer Christina Maggiorre- don't really believe anything per se- at least not anything they can all agree on. Instead they are bound by an unshakable disbelief that HIV causes AIDS.

I have written about AIDS denialism before and don't have time to go in to detail here about the mental gymnastics necessary to hold such a belief today. Mbeki is a special case though, because he led the country most impacted by HIV/AIDS for almost a decade and his dithering, obstructionism and denial caused over 300,000 deaths, including some 35,000 babies. Some in South Africa are calling for him to be charged with murder or even genocide.

On the same page is an article about climatologist Phil Jones resigning from his position at a UK university, in the wake of scandal over the suppression of minority opinion on the question of climate change. Hacked emails apparently show Jones and others conspiring, or thinking about conspiring to keep the work of scientists who question the majority opinions about global warming out of journals, to skew and hide data when it didn't agree with their position and to 'overstate' the data in support of their position.

On the surface these two stories seem at odds. The climate scientists are accused of suppressing minority opinion, while Mbeki embraced it. But really they are about the same thing- allowing political or really any pre-determined agenda to drive science. In the case of Mbeki, he embraced a position that was attractive to him- maybe because it harmonized with aspects of his political world view, maybe because he realized how daunting the reality of HIV in South Africa was and couldn't wrap his head around dealing with it. In the case of Jones, it sounds likely that he and others allowed their sense of urgency over the threat of climate change to justify their efforts to marginalize their opponents and overstate the data in support of their position.

The strength of science is that it should have no agenda. Scientists of course are human and do have agendas- political, professional, personal- and the process of peer review and publication

seeks to account for that. Science is not a set of beliefs or stories- it is a methodology, a way of uncovering what is hidden. Put another way- science is not so much about discovering what is, as showing what isn't. The greatest accomplishment of modern medicine is not germ theory, but the discrediting of once widely held beliefs like miasmas and humors.

One needs to go where the truth is- where the data tells it is. In the case of Mbeki and his cohorts, they had to reject out of hand the crushing weight of the accumulated data showing HIV to be the cause of AIDS- and instead embrace a hodgepodge of crackpot ideas, paranoia and gaps in understanding to make their case. For Jones it appears there is a lack of trust in the process, a fear that an honest hearing of the facts wouldn't support their idea, or might fuel their opponent's efforts to sew doubt.

Let the truth win out. Let the data be your guide.

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