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Purifying science

By Wendy Wagner and Rena Steinzor
March 30, 2009

President [Barack Obama's](#) order this month striking down Bush-era barriers to embryonic stem cell research overshadowed his perhaps larger announcement on science that day: He directed his science adviser to develop a comprehensive plan to protect science from politics in his administration.

That's a worthy enterprise, and it will be a challenge given the vast scope of the problem. During the Bush years, it was all too common for administration political appointees to suppress or reshape scientific findings. They infamously tried to suppress a report by [Environmental Protection Agency](#) scientists on the scope of global warming, for example. But ending such heavy-handed manipulation by political appointees is the low-hanging fruit of the effort to restore science to its rightful role in policymaking. It absolutely needs to be picked, but there's much more to harvest.

Indeed, the problem predates [George W. Bush](#), and President Obama's solution will need to go beyond rooting out the most egregious habits of his predecessor.

Here's some of what the administration should do:

• *"Unstack" the advisory panels.* One tool for incorporating the best

judgment of the scientific community into policymaking is scientific advisory panels made up of outside experts. Many agencies are required by law to use them. So, for example, the EPA has a number of scientific advisory panels and turns to them for counsel when deciding how much of a given toxin in the air or water is unsafe.

Unfortunately, those panels can be stacked with scientists working for the very industries facing regulation. While it's not just a Bush problem, he made it worse. In 2002, for example, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson intervened in the selection process for an advisory panel on lead poisoning issues, booting a noted pediatrician, blocking two other respected public health scientists who had been nominated, and installing four industry-tied panelists. Soon after, the panel ignored a consensus call from the public health community for a tighter standard on lead.

• *Treat private and public research with the same healthy skepticism.* Another significant problem is the "most favored science" status accorded to private, mostly industry-sponsored research. Companies seeking approval to market chemicals, pharmaceuticals, pesticides and more rightly bear the burden of demonstrating through research that their products are safe and effective. Sometimes they commission that research; sometimes they conduct it in-house. Both approaches are cause for concern about bias, intentional or otherwise, because the sponsor has a vested interest in the findings.

But once the research is submitted, it is largely insulated from all-important scrutiny by public health scientists, including agency scientists, because the underlying data are not required to be shared with the public and may not even be supplied to the agency. By contrast, all of the data underlying research submitted by federally funded researchers are made available to the public. In addition, federally funded research is subject to more opportunities for challenges.

• *Disclose more.* In general, industry science and scientists are in need of that greatest of all disinfectants: sunshine. When companies submit research findings, they should have to disclose what level of control they exercised over the design of the study. Similarly, when scientific advisory panelists are chosen, they should have to disclose in full any ties to the industry being regulated. The public should know who has a stake in what.

• *Protect whistle-blowers.* One lesson from past political meddling in science is that it's too easy for [White House](#) operatives to intimidate career scientists. What federal employee wouldn't be hard-pressed to refuse a directive from a White House staffer? One way to provide more protection for scientists and others is to beef up whistle-blower protections.

• *Behave.* New policies can make a big difference, but it's also critical that the White House and Obama appointees across the government lead by example, demonstrating by word and deed that scientific research isn't just another rhetorical weapon subject to fudging and corner-cutting. President Obama has made clear his intention to set that example. Now comes the hard part.

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Wendy Wagner of Case Western Reserve University Law School and the [University of Texas](#) Law School and Rena Steinzor of the University of Maryland Law School are member scholars of the Center for Progressive Reform and the editors of "Rescuing Science from Politics: Regulation and the Distortion of Scientific Research."

What they're saying online

From Chris C. Mooney on The Intersection:

"Now, not only can we hope for a more transparent method of dealing with any potential new politics and science allegations; we can also hope for a much stronger presidential science adviser with the power to investigate them. For that's perhaps the most significant aspect of the President's scientific integrity memorandum. It puts John Holdren on a par with the heads of the federal agencies - with the Cabinet - who need to report to him to show that their houses are in order. In other words, he'll serve as a central science czar whose role is to provide good advice and preserve informational integrity, and who will actually be listened to and heeded."

More at http://scienceblogs.com/intersection/2009/03/the_importance_of_obamas_scienc.php

From Daniel Halper on DoubleThink Online:

"According to [President Obama's] view, science needs no political regulation, because science itself is able to discover and reveal knowledge of good and evil. Scientists become the moral authorities, replacing all others, whether those authorities are based on divine revelation or even secular moral reasoning. Science, however, is incapable of actually serving as the basis for moral authority, says Yuval Levin [author of 'Imagining the Future: Science and American Democracy']."

More at www.americasfuture.org/doublethink/2009/03/25/putting-science-in-its-place

From EcoTone:

"This memo [from Mr. Obama on the need for scientific integrity] should be reassuring to the scientific community. Yet the fact that it was necessary to explicitly state these seemingly obvious expectations is disconcerting. A useful product of this review would be to delineate the instances in which scientific information is used - which is not outlined in the memorandum. Scientific information can have all the integrity in the world, but if it's not used in policy decisions, then what good is it to the administration?"

More at www.esa.org/esablog/?p=492

From the Center for Progressive Reform:

"Policymaking in Washington and around the nation often relies on scientific research. That's particularly true at the regulatory level, where the vigorous implementation and enforcement of statutory environmental, health and safety standards depends on sound judgments based on clean science. In recent years, however, the scientific process has itself been polluted with politics. Corporations have sometimes suppressed scientific data that reflected badly on their products and processes, and government-sponsored scientific panels and advisory committees have become increasingly slanted toward industry at the expense of the environment, health and safety."

More at www.progressivereform.org/scienceClean.cfm

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