

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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COVID-19: Science Versus Politics

The struggle between science and politics is not new. The two have historically faced off numerous times for various reasons. As environmental health professionals, we look to science to guide our professional decisions. At times, those of us who use science as a basis for our work can feel under attack by politicians who deny the science (e.g., climate change is not real) and refuse the advice or information provided by educated and reputable scientists. The goal of science is to search for more information to better understand the world around us and how we interact with it.

We have recently seen that researchers, environmental scientists, and public health professionals have provided guidance and information on methods concerning COVID-19 prevention and reduction of its spread. The application of the advice fell to the political system and the actions and reactions of the general public.

Countries worldwide have handled the pandemic differently based on two things: science and politics. Each country has worked with the science, research, and technology they possess, as well as the political situation of the country. As a result, the magnitude, duration, and impact of the virus has been unique to each country. There has not been a one-size-fits-all solution because we are not a one-size-fits-all world. Resources and politics are different, as is the application of the science and recommendations.

As we look at the events as they have unfolded this year, several questions come to mind. While scientists and political leaders were working together to flatten the curve, was there a perception of success before it was actually achieved? Did politicians move too quickly to restart the economy? Should masks

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have been required from the beginning? These questions cannot be answered with science or politics alone—they must be considered with both science and politics. Government interactions were utilized (politics) in the implementation of policy, as well as application of protocols. While we each have our own answers and opinions on these questions, let us be sure to remember that our own individual viewpoints are influenced by both politics and science.

We have seen that education is a powerful tool. The challenge here is how do we educate, promote, or share scientific information in a way that influential politicians will gravitate toward, accept, and utilize. The answer is actually simpler than you would image. We, as environmental health professionals, need to get engaged. We need to communicate with our policy makers on all levels, from local to national. In this manner we can effect change in policy. Providing education and sound information to our local leaders is a beginning. Each of us is a voice for our profession. We can make a difference by contacting our mayors, local boards of health, and county and state leaders.

The environmental health profession needs to be a voice in the decision-making process to open restaurants and to keep processing facilities, schools, and retail operations safe,

to name a few. We can provide education on how illness is spread and the measures to implement to keep people safe. Environmental health needs to be a part of the process in writing the protocols we are currently working under, as well as future policy change.

Question the science and guidance behind written protocols. I can tell you from experience that your voice will be heard. When Texas decided to reopen bars, the original protocol prohibited seating at the bar for consumption of beverages and food. That sounded reasonable. One question posed to the governor's office in regard to this protocol was why consumption was not prohibited at a bar located inside a restaurant. It was a simple question, loaded with science behind it, and it made policy makers reevaluate the decision. The protocol was changed for both restaurants and bars that same week. Different, reasonable, and safer protective measures were put into place that applied science and education.

Coming back to science versus politics, can the two work well together? It is possible for the outcome of this union to be beneficial to all. Environmental health professionals, however, need to be part of that equation to provide input from our experiences and education.

On a historical note regarding science and politics: President John F. Kennedy set a goal in 1961 of landing a man on the moon and returning him before the end of the decade. The goal was achieved on July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin landed on the moon and returned to the Earth on July 24. 🚀

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