

BEHAVIOR MATTERS

15 Years of Health Behavior Advocacy

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Published by Health Behavior Media

Health Behavior Media books are published by
the Center for the Advancement of Health.

Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data

ISBN: 978-0-9815794-0-5

Visit CFAH's website at www.cfah.org.

First U.S. Edition 2008

CHAPTER 10

The Mutual Obligations of Science and Society

In 2003, the Institute of Medicine released a report that found that if what was known about preventing, detecting and treating cancer were to be fully applied right now in the United States, by the year 2015, there would be approximately 100,000 fewer cancer cases and 60,000 fewer cancer deaths each year.¹⁹

This was great news!

These IOM statistics vividly illustrated both the potential benefits of the scientific enterprise and the needless suffering and waste that result from not taking seriously the challenge of capturing the value of health research. Think of it: 100,000 fewer people going through the agony of a cancer diagnosis. Sixty thousand fewer deaths—just by applying things we already know!

A year later, the Center for the Advancement of Health and the National Cancer Institute convened a meeting of professionals to talk about accelerating the application of what is known—how might we improve the use of scientific evidence to guide the practices of cancer prevention and control? We brought together 50 senior researchers, 50 practitioners and policy-makers and 50 funders of cancer control research.

We asked them to discuss what changes were needed to increase the use of evidence to guide cancer control activities by doctors and in communities.

Interestingly, there was absolute unanimity: As far as everyone present was concerned, this was indeed a serious problem that required fixing. But equally interestingly, as far as they were concerned, it had to be fixed by *somebody else*.

The *scientists* didn't think it was *their* job to take this on. They said:

- We aren't trained to do it; we were trained to conduct research.

18. What is the role of scientists in ensuring that the value of their work is captured in terms of real improvements in health? The essay was adapted from an address at the hooding ceremony for doctoral candidates and their families at the commencement in May 2006 at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

19. Institute of Medicine. 2003. Fulfilling the promise of cancer prevention and early detection. Institute of Medicine Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Such activities will not contribute to our tenure and promotion decisions.
- Our grant funding doesn't cover the time it would take to completely reorganize the way we do business.

The *practitioners*—primary care physicians, nurses and public health administrators—didn't think it was *their* job to take this on. They said:

- We aren't trained to do it; we were trained to deliver health care and health education.
- We are overextended already and are staggering under the weight of paperwork.
- We find it difficult to stay current with the scientific literature in our own specialties and disciplines.
- We don't feel prepared to continually recalculate the state of the science on any specific issue and then act on it.

In short, they said that they just want to be told what works and they'll do it.

The *funders* agreed completely—the inability to translate knowledge from the laboratory to the living room was a serious problem, indeed—but it wasn't *theirs* to solve either. Researchers and practitioners and policy-makers have the responsibility to generate better proposals.

Don't get me wrong. All these people were invited to this meeting because we believed that their experience meant that they would be able to identify concrete recommendations about how to improve the effectiveness with which scientific evidence was transformed into effective cancer control efforts. But none of them was prepared to do so.

This is an issue of great importance to everyone who is currently or potentially a cancer patient—which, unfortunately, means everyone here. But my specific concern is about the significance of this incident for those of you who live and work within the academic community.

In the years since the Institute of Medicine report, the breach between what we *know* and what we *do* has attracted quite a bit of attention in medicine, public health, education, environmental and social policy.

But the response of academics has taken a while to come into full swing. Having discovered the gap between knowledge and practice to be an “unfortunate oversight,” academics have taken modest steps to narrow it, such as the addition of interdisciplinary research priorities, seminars, conferences and plans to format research findings more effectively so that practitioners can use them to make evidence-based decisions.

I am concerned, however, that the lag between scholarly inquiry and its benefit to society is not merely an unfortunate oversight. And I worry that this lag will not be overcome by doing more of what we have always done, with only a slight modification.

There is growing recognition among the general public that the research in which it has invested is not delivering its full benefit to society. And the somewhat casual response of academics from all disciplines is fueling a profound challenge to publicly supported research and to the academic enterprise in general.

Every day we hear news about cutbacks in public support for higher education and for scientific research. We read about communities that eschew the scientific basis of knowledge of the physical world and of others who sanction scholarly exploration on topics that trespass on their ideologies. David Keene, of the American Conservative Union, called American universities “the last privileged sanctuary in America for liberal collectivism.”

We are fortunate that some researchers are now documenting how far current policies and practices lag behind the state of the science in medicine, public health, education and environmental sciences. They rightly assume that such documentation—that is, accurately describing the problem—is a necessary first step to developing solutions and attracting the money and broad political will to implement them. And these reports of the unrealized potential of research are duly reported in the news media.

But here is the catch: the public reads this news, but does not intuitively grasp that documenting the gaps between research and practice is actually a step toward closing them.

Rather, they view these lags as evidence of (1) the shortcomings of science and scholarship; (2) another boondoggle to get additional money; (3) research as wasteful and unnecessary; (4) academies that sponsor learning for the sake of learning; and (5) those engaged in research as woolly-headed academics living off the fat of taxpayers’ generosity.

It is fascinating that in the 17th century, one of the eminent figures of the scientific revolution and one of the founders of modern science, René Descartes, not only predicted this disconnect between the scientific enterprise and the public—he also recommended a solution. Descartes wrote that “society promotes science by the endowment of scientists with safety, income and deference.”²⁰

But support of learning is not a free ride. Descartes wrote that it is the responsibility of scientists and scholars to educate the public and policy-makers about science and the work that goes on in the academy—to enlighten society about its aims and to work to ensure that society reaps the benefits in which it has invested. Descartes believed that science thrived and society progressed when there was cooperation among the governing authorities, the intellectuals and the general public.

He warned of dire consequences of non-cooperation if and when members of the academy become isolated from the larger society.

Descartes invited the *philosophes*—that is, the scientists and scholars—the public authorities, and the general public to, “join in common opposition against those opponents who draw their beliefs from ‘the ancient books, their histories, and their fables’... those who, believing themselves ‘devout’ and ‘great friends of God,’ though in fact are ‘bigots and superstitious,’ who have committed the greatest crimes that can be committed by men, as betraying cities, killing princes, and exterminating entire peoples, only because they did not follow their opinion.”²¹

20. Bridoux ed. René Descartes, *Oeuvres et Lettres*. Pleiade edition, Paris 1952, p. 168-169.

21. Bridoux ed. René Descartes, *Oeuvres et Lettres*. Pleiade edition, Paris 1952, p. 141-42.

Fortunately, we are not yet at the point where princes are being summarily executed, but we are at a time when the academy is on the defensive.

Every one of those scientists who came to the meeting I described absolutely agreed that while their work had important implications for the well-being of society, they had no role in ensuring that their research actually resulted in reductions in suffering and loss of life. They believed they had no responsibility to inform the public about what they were studying and why, how it relates to the problems experienced by thousands of people in this country every day, and how their investigations might benefit them.

This was not their job, not what they were trained for and not what they were paid to do. They thought someone else should do it.

These responses vividly illustrate the vulnerability of our academic research enterprise.

Multiplied a thousand times, the casual dismissal of the mutual obligations of scientists and society spells danger. When scientists fail to make plain to the public their purposes, methods, and aims; when they take refuge in complexity and technical language; when they are contemptuous of the public's impatience with uncertainty, then the public that we expect to cherish learning and science will be easily convinced that research is self-referential, isolated in the academy, irrelevant to their own lives and threatening to their faith.

This problem may have been with us since 17th century—but now it is critical. In those days, you simply had to convince one king, one academy or one wealthy patron of the value of your research. But today, in a hyper-democratic blogosphere, the audience for such claims is much larger and it wants to see the proof. And there is considerably more at stake.

For many of you—you distinguished scientists and educators, you veterans of the struggle to demonstrate to the public the value of disciplined scholarly inquiry—this is a reminder that your responsibility to this university extends to speaking about your work and its value to the citizens of your community, of the nation and, indeed, the world.

But for those of you who are moving on to the next phase of your chosen career, this should not be an extra duty but rather one that is a natural and expected extension of your life as a committed, engaged, fully qualified professional.

For many of you, the humbling experience of writing your dissertation is still vivid in your mind. During the process of writing a dissertation and defending it to a group of senior scholars, you are forced to realize the modesty of your contribution to the larger fabric of your discipline, the modesty of the contributions of your discipline within the university and the modesty of the contributions of the university to the larger workings of our society.

But at the same time, do you remember those few flashes during that long slog when you suddenly saw the entire world through the lens of your topic? When, for a brief moment, your idea provided the analysis that could cure disease, stop wars, or explain 80 percent of the variance in human behavior? How could it be that you were the only one working on this?

It is at that moment when you first get a visceral sense of the sheer magnificence and power of ideas—and the first inkling of your ability to shape and manipulate ideas to make them matter in the world.

It is the combination of these two insights that make you acutely aware right now of the importance of my message: You recently discovered how much ideas matter and have just experienced firsthand the immense commitment and energy it takes to actually *have* an idea, to explain it and to make it take the first small steps toward contributing to society.

When you graduate, you get a valuable ticket punched, you go through the gate, and the whole journey of your professional life is ahead of you, with all the glorious potential, the frustrations, the adventure and hard work of making a career and making a difference.

I urge you to hold fast to these insights about the power of ideas and the magnitude of the task of making them matter during the next few years as you become absorbed in your postgraduate life, distracted by figuring out important things like the job, your house and the stock market.

Your career and the advancement of research in this country depends on your willingness to engage with both your university or research institution *and* with the American public, to conduct superb research *and* to undertake the challenge of capturing and explaining its value to the larger community.

The education you have received confers not only privilege and honor, it imposes a duty to speak to your fellow citizens about the value of scientific research. You must do this for your own future—and we need you to do it for ours.