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Democratisation of scientific advice

Secrecy and democracy don't mix

EDITOR—Bal et al struggle to show that "concealing information from public scrutiny" is a necessary condition for "democratic function" but fail.[1] The fault in their argument is the assumption that an advisory committee should alone decide how the question is framed, how different types of evidence should be privileged, and how the "performance" should be presented. Similar debates have been vigorously pursued in the health impact assessment community.

Dissention in the scientific community is not a problem that should be hidden from an ignorant public but a fundamental mechanism in the advancement of knowledge. It is true that knowledge of temporary or continued dissention will be used naively or even mischievously and so confuse issues, but that is no excuse for hiding the process by which conclusions are reached.

Scientific reasoning is a powerful tool for improving public decision making, but it is not sufficient. Account has to be taken of lay knowledge. Experiential evidence, which covers far more than experience of disease, is one part of this. "Irrational" concerns (better described as differently rational) and values also have to be taken into account as do all the messy considerations of political possibility. That scientists should seek to avoid the complexity of wicked problems by retreating into secrecy is understandable, but benign paternalism is no answer to mature democratic making of public policy.

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1 Bal R, Bijker WE, Hendriks R. Democratisation of scientific advice. *BMJ* 2004;329:1339-1341. (4 December.)

Authors advocate getting dressed for public performance, not nakedness is bad

EDITOR—Rather than arguing that nakedness is bad like Abbasi,[1] in our article on the democratisation of science we urge transparency advocates to be specific about the body parts that should be displayed publicly.[2]

As scientific advisory councils find themselves at the intersections of science and society, they necessarily transgress the boundaries of science. This makes them vulnerable to the politicisation of their work. Sound scientific advice is urgently needed in a time where our societies are overwhelmed with new technologies. Therefore, we think that science advisory boards do well in taking utmost care in shaping their relations with policy actors and the citizenry.

The experience of the Health Council of the Netherlands in dealing with scientific elements (colliding knowledge claims, etc), can be inspiring to develop methods and procedures to allow societal elements into the advisory process.[3] Transparency about one's arguments, allowing your readership to join you in (or dissent from) a line of reasoning, is one of these fragile new procedures that enables the council to be both scientific and useful to policy and public debate.

Scientific journals should publish dissenting voices, as this is important for the advancement of science (although journals also have their backstage processes, as McCabe says in her rapid response[4]). Science advisory boards, however, are to advise government on the state of the art. Debates in the committee further that goal, as this is useful in mobilising the expertise of committee members. Confidentiality of the committee process is essential for the production of such debates (public scrutiny during the process might deter openness among experts). Whereas it goes without saying that lasting dissent is not to be concealed, it seems unwise to bring temporary dissent into the open, as this would be easily taken up to politicise the advice and thus render it ineffective.

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Charcoal burning is also popular for suicide pacts made on the internet

EDITOR—Rajagopal's editorial discussed how strangers can initiate suicide pacts on the internet.[1] The two cited Japanese suicide pacts both used a new suicide method, charcoal burning. These widely publicised pacts were followed by four additional pacts and 13 deaths in two months, all of whom used charcoal burning. The new suicide method entails smouldering barbecue coal in a small and sealed environment, such as a bedroom, with the aim of producing a carbon monoxide chamber in a short time.[2–4]

In Hong Kong we had also observed that suicide pacts commonly used charcoal burning to institute death. In 2002 and 2003, 20 of the 22 suicide pacts (91%) used charcoal burning. Of all charcoal burning deaths during the same period, 7% were suicide pacts (unpublished review of coroners' case records for 2002-3, Coroner Court, Hong Kong SAR).

Several characteristics of charcoal burning make it desirable for people who want to commit suicide together. Unlike other methods of suicide, such as jumping and hanging, it can easily be shared. Besides, charcoal burning is often portrayed as non-disfiguring and painless. Hence, passive partners in suicide pacts could be more easily lured into the act.

The internet, apart from connecting otherwise isolated anomies in forming suicide pacts in Japan, has played an important part in spreading the new suicide method across societies. Charcoal burning and cyber suicide pacts are examples of how globalisation and new technology are creating new challenges for global health.

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Submission to multiple journals to reduce publication times

Idea needs further evaluation

EDITOR—Torgerson et al moot the idea of submission to multiple journals to reduce publication times, but their article raises more questions than it provides answers.[1]

Firstly, to how many journals would authors be allowed to submit their article, and who will decide the number of simultaneous submissions—the authors or the journal?

Secondly, in the event of simultaneous acceptance by many journals, who would decide that the accepted article should remain with which journal—the authors (who always want their article published in the best journal) or the journals themselves (which might fight for the article if it is really high quality)?

Thirdly, what would happen to low rated journals (which may not be getting the article in first place)?

Fourthly, if the article were rejected by all the journals to which it was submitted, should the authors be allowed to resubmit it