

Reaction: Censorship in Science and Medicine

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Scientists are truth-seekers. Beginning with observations, the pursuit of knowledge and discovery of the world around us has crafted fields of research. Internal checkpoints of peer review, study design, and statistical power uphold authenticity in hypothesis-driven research. Thus, the expectations of research are such that any published study is supposed to be valued as *fact*. Any data therefore has no political affiliation, no emotion, no opinion, no ulterior motive...just truth that can be used to inform better decisions on how people can live their best lives. This is the beauty of scientific study and principles – it is a precious practice unlike any other field of work or study. Efforts to limit the way that scientists communicate their research and to others effectively diminishes their professional authority, and undermines the integrity of evidence-based research.

My initial reaction to reading the Washington Post report that broke the news story of censorship at the CDC was similar to many of my colleagues: frustration and disbelief. While CDC officials were quick to respond to the “ban” and rename the edits as strong suggestions, the message was clear: government agencies are changing the manner in which information is presented and disseminated to the public.

Language is critical to how we perceive the world around us, and to how we learn. This applies to all aspects of life, not just science. Imagine trying to describe to someone how to bake a cake, but not being able to use the words flour, egg, sugar, and oven. Here is my attempt: “Mix together the ground-up bleached dried plant with the sweet white mini crystals and the unborn chicken, put everything in a pan and let it sit in the metal box at super high temperatures until the liquid turns to solid!” The general message is there, but in a convoluted sense. Now, imagine trying to counsel patients or the public on decisions regarding their personal and community health: nutrition, medication, vaccinations, infectious disease, etc. Scientists and healthcare professionals need to full reign of every word they need to communicate important information to the rest of the public. Substitutions and synonyms are simply inadequate.

Perhaps more frustrating than the alleged ban itself is the context in which the dispute arose; senior CDC officials were reviewing and giving feedback to analysts on congressional budget justification reports. *What does this mean?* It means that if certain groups in the CDC want government funding, they will have to tailor their language to appease political viewpoints. This is another stab to the scientific process, and is one of many that has slowly shifted the value of research from joyful discovery to measured success in the form of number of publications and grants attained. In creating an academic culture that rewards re-discovery rather than discovery, we limit ourselves to endless possibilities and stunt societal growth.

Censorship is the manifestation of close-mindedness, an unwillingness to learn, and an effort to shut down others who differ in belief and opinion. Binding scientists’ hands by withholding funding and limiting their voice to the greater community only serves to endanger the general progress, education, and health of the public.