

When politics gets in the way of science

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Trofim Lysenko, Stalin's director of biology, is best remembered for blocking the science of Mendelian genetics because the science was stubbornly resistant to Marxist ideology. Consequently, the entire field of genetics was banned in the USSR. Politics-driven science — what could possibly go wrong?

Unlike citizens of the former Soviet Union, Westerners are much less familiar with seeing science fully subordinate to political agendas. But with the hydroxychloroquine debate of 2020, we are getting a taste of it.

Hydroxychloroquine has been in use worldwide for more than 65 years. It's been prescribed safely billions of times. And yet, for political reasons — and, more specifically, for anti-Trump reasons — there is a lobbying campaign to block hydroxychloroquine from patients with COVID-19.

Based on the best evidence available today, hydroxychloroquine — HCQ, for short — has been shown to be effective in early-stage treatment of COVID-19, the illness brought on by the novel coronavirus. Because of hyper-politization, however, this evidence is being ignored. After all, if there's an effective treatment for COVID-19, then maybe the shutdowns and distance learning for our children and mask mandates and social distancing requirements aren't necessary, from a medical standpoint.

And if they're not necessary from a medical standpoint, then what excuse could we use to keep the schools closed for inperson learning, and to keep the businesses shuttered, and to keep the rest of society under the government's thumb?

It was way back in March when President Trump first touted the benefits of HCQ as a potential therapy in treating COVID-19. On March 19, he announced that the FDA would fast-track approval of several treatments, including HCQ. He said the drug "has been around for a long time so we know if things don't go as planned it's not going to kill anybody."

Three days later, The Wall Street Journal published a piece extolling the virtues of HCQ in combination with azithromycin, more commonly known as Zithromax (ZPak). The authors — Dr. Jeff Colyer, chairman of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Health, and Dr. Daniel Hinthorn, director of the Division of Infectious Disease at the University of Kansas Medical Center — argued that, based on their experiences treating patients, the HCQ-Z Pack treatment can be quite effective in early applications.

The tide turned in May with The Lancet, which published a study saying HCQ treatment for COVID-19 was ineffective. The left pounced, using the study to trash Mr. Trump for having promoted use of the drug.

But then, just a few weeks later, the authors of the study were forced to ask The Lancet to retract the study, because the research firm on whose data the authors had relied could not or would not confirm their data. All of a sudden, it was the anti-HCQ crowd that was left with mud on its face.

Then, the FDA issued a statement revoking the emergency use authorization it had granted in March — a revocation which, paradoxically, allowed doctors once again to prescribe HCQ “off label” for COVID-19 patients.

Then, on July 2, a new study published by the Henry Ford Health System declared that treatment with HCQ cut the death rate in half in sick patients hospitalized with COVID-19 — and, critically, without the heart-related side effects that some studies had shown.

This was the background to the press conference held on July 27 by America’s Frontline Doctors, an ad hoc group of physicians who have been dealing with COVID-19 patients for months. At that press conference, several of them spoke of the virtues of using HCQ as a treatment for early-stage COVID patients. Video clips of the event went viral, logging more than 20 million views; President Trump and his son, Don Jr., tweeted and retweeted the clips. And then Facebook, Twitter and YouTube removed the video clips for spreading what the tech giants called “misinformation” about COVID-19.

Asked at a White House press briefing the following day what he thought about the use of HCQ to treat COVID19, the president acknowledged the politicization of the process when he responded, “[P]olitically, it doesn’t seem to be too popular. You know why? Because I recommend it. When I recommend something, they like to say, ‘Don’t use it.’” Ironically, even as the tech giants were patting themselves on the back for having “saved” their public audiences from having received “misinformation,” two days after they removed the clips, FDA chief Stephen Hahn acknowledged that the choice to use HCQ as a treatment for COVID-19 was not properly a question for government regulation, but a choice to be made by a doctor and patient.

Science is at its best when its aims are scientific advancement and truth, and its method is rigorous scientific research. Political agendas and biases toward certain outcomes are unseemly in the field of science, and do nothing to advance medicine or patients’ interests.

The Lysenko approach to science is best left to totalitarian regimes. Americans deserve better.

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