

COVID-19: Two Things About “The Science”

On October 4, three scientists published “The Great Barrington Declaration,” a statement named for the Massachusetts town in which they met.

Infectious disease epidemiologist Sunetra Gupta of the University of Oxford, professor of medicine Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford University, and professor of medicine Martin Kulldorff of Harvard Medical School call for a “focused protection” approach to overcoming COVID-19. Versus the “lockdown/shutdown” efforts we’ve suffered through for the last seven months, they support letting the young and healthy get substantially back to normal life and start building herd immunity, while attempting to shield the most vulnerable among us: The elderly and those with particularly dangerous potential co-morbidities.

The Declaration now boasts more than half a million co-signers, ranging from eminent figures in the scientific, medical, and political communities, to interested regular citizens, and of course to the inevitable trolls (i.e. “Dr. Johnny Fartpants”).

Of course, popularity isn’t the same thing as scientific validity. The Declaration was instantly met with smug dismissal from the government and academic “experts” who recommended, and continue to recommend, the lockdown/shutdown approach.

I’m not a scientist. I don’t play a scientist on TV. I’m not going to try to fool you into thinking I’m an expert on the science surrounding COVID-19.

Nonetheless, I support the Great Barrington Declaration — not because of the specific approach it advocates, although I agree with that approach, but because it demonstrates two important truths about science that many seem to have lost sight of recently.

First, there is no such thing as “THE science.” Different scientists are reaching different conclusions about how COVID-19 spreads, how it might be prevented from spreading, who’s most at risk from it, etc.

All of those conclusions are necessarily tentative and provisional, and can change as new information becomes available. That’s how science works. More than a century after he first published it, physicists are still conducting experiments to test Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity. COVID-19 has been on the radar for less than a year.

Claims of a “scientific consensus” on the pandemic are worse than false: They’re irrelevant. The truth is whatever it is, much of that truth remains to be discovered, and the percentage of scientists agreeing doesn’t tell us right from wrong. “This well-known scientist says it, I believe it, that settles it” isn’t respecting science, it’s practicing religion. Especially if the “scientist” in question is really just a bureaucrat in a lab coat.

Second, science can't determine what we value or how much. Life involves trade-offs. How many millions have the "lockdown" mandates plunged into poverty? How many depressed individuals have finally given in to suicidal urges heightened by fear and confinement? How many businesses have shut their doors? We could end the pandemic in short order if we all starved ourselves to death. Would it be worth the cost? Science can't tell us. Deciding what's important to us isn't its province.

Science holds, and deserves, an honored place in society. Turning it into a state religion damages both it and us.