

Is Science Important?



To the Editor:

I read with interest the commentary “Is Science Important? A Recent Lecture.”¹ Something troubled me about the conclusion, “Long live Science!!”

The image this cheer evokes is curious. Applauding science as if it were a monarch seems to obscure the fact that the benevolent dictator can also be the tyrant. Let us not forget that the biology and chemistry that brought us antibiotics also brought us sarin gas, and that the physics that allows the rocket to reach the stars is the physics that delivers a nuclear warhead. If technology, as the editor suggests, is “the child of science,” we would do well to remember that it is a 2-year-old, one minute endearing itself to the human family and the next throwing a fit, hitting, screaming, and pushing others down. Although I concur that public health measures eventually rescued mankind from the poor sanitation and health disparities of Elizabethan England, I question whether it is appropriate to conclude that science was the champion. In our eagerness to extol science, we risk missing the fact that the unhealthy conditions of Elizabethan London resulted from the growth of industry, exploration, and war craft—the technological children of the Renaissance. Science is indeed a fickle sovereign.

I firmly support the conclusion that science is important. But in making this point, we should maintain caution. Soliciting trust in scientific inquiry at political, public, and personal levels will require more than extolling science in general or shaming those who do not trust its tenets. When

we speak of advances in science, particularly ones that relieve human suffering, protect public health, or increase our understanding of the physical universe, it is worth remembering that these advances come not from science itself but from something infinitely more complex: specifically, individuals who, perhaps driven by a spark of wonder, work within a particular scientific discipline. For these individuals, science is a tool, not an ideology to be believed or rejected. If our goal is to foster support for the sciences, let us publicly commend the individuals who, by resisting bias, preserve the integrity of data and bring us new ways of addressing timeless problems. Let us teach our students that what differentiates science as an instrument for good from technologies used for evil or selfish gain are virtues: honesty versus deception; compassion versus avarice; wisdom versus imprudence; and perseverance versus impatience. These virtues cannot result from scientific inquiry; they precede and supersede the appearance of scientific inquiry in human history. For all the wonders of science, as a discipline it remains dependent on the integrity of the hand into which it is laid. Is science important? Of course it is, but infinitely more important is the heart of the scientist.

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Reference

1. Alpert JS. Is science important? A recent lecture. *Am J Med.* 2018;131(3):215.

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