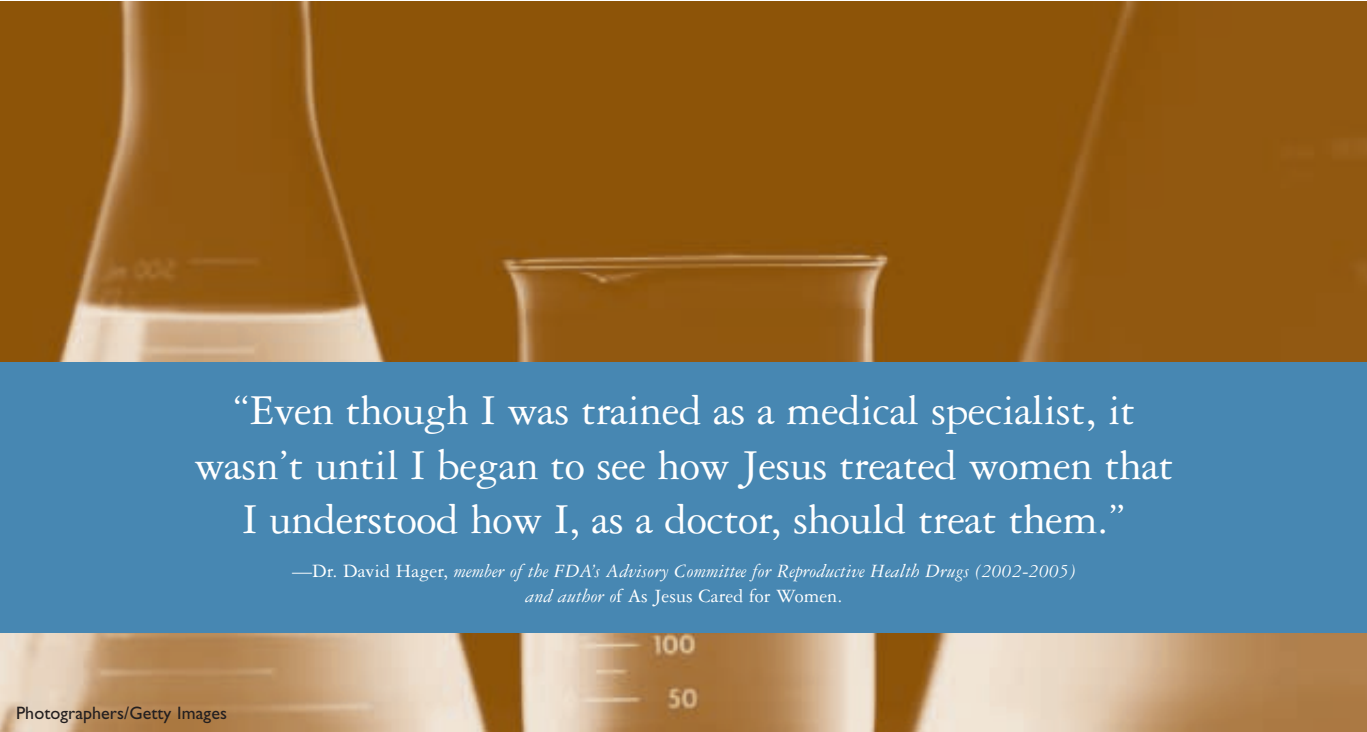




The United States' scientific community has made giant leaps forward for humankind. But today, the methodology, research, and rigor responsible for such advances is being compromised. Scientists and women's advocates agree: We cannot allow ideology to trump science.



“Even though I was trained as a medical specialist, it wasn't until I began to see how Jesus treated women that I understood how I, as a doctor, should treat them.”

—Dr. David Hager, *member of the FDA's Advisory Committee for Reproductive Health Drugs (2002-2005)*
and author of *As Jesus Cared for Women*.

Over-the-counter approval of Plan B could prevent 1.7 million unplanned pregnancies in the US each year.

Susan Wood is an unlikely rebel.

During her 15 years in public health, this respected researcher was fastidious about following protocol — until the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced in August 2005 that it would indefinitely delay over-the-counter approval of Plan B emergency contraception.

“This medication is so important for women’s health that I could no longer work for the FDA if my job meant having to defend this decision,” says Wood, who resigned as director of the FDA’s Office of Women’s Health shortly after the announcement. “The FDA overruled the advice of its senior staff and two independent scientific advisory panels and violated its mandate of making decisions based on science.”

Wood’s resignation is part of the growing outrage against what health advocates call a disturbing trend: the triumph of political ideology over proven medical research. In the realm of women’s health, egregious examples range from emergency contraception to sexual education to environmental toxins.

Delaying Access to Emergency Contraception

Be it the American Medical Association, the Women’s Liberation Birth Control Project, or the National Council of Jewish Women, health and women’s groups across the nation are united in their criticism of the FDA’s three-year delay in approving over-the-counter sale of Plan B, a drug known as emergency contraception because it is 89 percent effective at preventing unintended pregnancy if taken within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse.

While the FDA cited concerns about minors’ access to Plan B, health advocates charge the agency with bowing to pressure from conservative policymakers and say its caution about giving the drug to women under 17 is ideological, not scientific.

“The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American

College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists both say the FDA’s concerns about safety in younger women are unwarranted,” says Robert Fenichel, a clinical instructor at the Georgetown University Medical Center and former FDA administrator. “Studies prove this drug is safe for women of all ages and that its availability does not lead to irresponsible sexual behavior.”

According to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, over-the-counter approval of Plan B could prevent 1.7 million unplanned pregnancies in the US each year. “At this rate, however, the FDA could drag its decision out for another three years,” says Judy Waxman, vice president for health and reproductive rights at the National Women’s Law Center.

Harming Youth with Misinformation

Since 2001, the federal government has more than doubled funding for abstinence-only programs that aim to stop teens from having sex before marriage and are taught in an estimated one-third of US middle and high schools.

In 2003, a federal report found that 11 of the 13 most popular abstinence-only programs fail to give students accurate information, instead teaching falsehoods including that HIV can be contracted through saliva and that abortion can lead to sterility and suicide. A Columbia University study found that teens who take abstinence-until-marriage pledges are less likely than their peers to use condoms — but six times more likely to have oral sex and four times more likely to have anal sex.

Nevertheless, by 2009, the federal government hopes to boost annual funding for abstinence-only education from \$204 million to \$270 million. Meanwhile, comprehensive sex-ed programs that promote condom use will receive no dedicated funding.

“These developments are disturbing because they do a disservice to American girls,” says Debra Hauser, vice president



of Advocates for Youth. “Young women in the US have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrialized world, and one of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections.”

Concealing the Truth about Toxins

According to the Women’s Foundation of California, women bear the brunt of environmental toxins, which cost them \$12.2 billion in health treatment each year. According to the advocacy group Breast Cancer Action, pollution likely contributes to the fact that one in eight US women develops breast cancer. “Instead of working to address these health problems, the administration is catering to the manufacturing and power industries with lax environmental regulations,” says Felice Stadler, National Wildlife Federation policy specialist.

Environmentalists say one of the worst affronts may come in the form of mercury, a toxin that is pumped into the environment by the United States’ growing number of coal-fired power plants. Mercury contamination can exacerbate fibromyalgia, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, and other conditions for which women are at high risk. This February, a landmark study by the University of North Carolina–Asheville found one in five women of reproductive age has enough mercury in her body to harm the nervous system of a developing fetus. Even so, the administration suppressed a report about mercury’s impact on public health and continues to back its mercury regulations, although 15 states are contesting them in federal court.

Demanding Integrity

How did we get to the point where health statistics can be ignored and ideology can trump proven science? “It started in the 1950s, when Big Tobacco set up the Tobacco Institute to disprove studies showing smoking leads to cancer,” says Merrill Goozner,

director of the Integrity in Science project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. “In recent years, this trend has become pervasive as the religious right promotes its agenda.”

Cases in point include “intelligent design,” which has been incorporated into public school science curricula in some states, and the federal ban on the creation of new embryonic stem cells, which is delaying research on Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, and other diseases.

Violations of scientific integrity have become so widespread that 6,000 scientists — including Nobel laureates, National Medal of Science recipients, and former White House advisers to both parties — have signed a petition charging the administration with unprecedented “manipulation of the process through which science enters into its decisions.”

In the realm of women’s health, scientists have had plenty to protest in recent years. In 2002, the National Cancer Institute issued a fact sheet suggesting an unproven link between abortion and breast cancer. Since then, several highly qualified researchers have been dropped from reproductive-health advisory boards and replaced with drug industry insiders. And in 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put a note on its website that questioned condoms’ proven efficacy in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

“This trend can be as insidious as setting up a phony, industry-funded think tank or as benign as funding to scientists,” says Goozner. “You have to ask, ‘Who is doing this study? Who is compiling the results? And is there a correlation between who sponsored the research and the outcome of this research?’”

With conservative ideologues holding sway in Congress, the Supreme Court, and state legislatures, health advocates must ask these questions at every turn. The answers could well bring integrity back into policymaking and protect the health of us all. ☞