

Is science ever enough? Dare to play politics

Richard Horton¹ argued that “medicine and public health are being co-opted into a political programme of population control to protect the power of the modern neoliberal state”. Measures to bend the COVID-19 pandemic would aim to protect economies more than population health. If true, what can we do? In many jurisdictions, public health authorities are under the control of democratically elected leaders. If other policies are desired, other leaders must be elected. And if public health scientists want to make a difference, they should leave science for a moment and dare to play politics.

COVID-19 is painfully reminding us that the path is very complex— from gathering evidence to the implementation of sound public health interventions.² Nothing is new in the fact that leaders or citizens are difficult to convince. Evidence in public health is never enough; more is needed to influence stakeholders and make them change. Thomas R Oliver was right when he said, “science can identify solutions to pressing public health problems, but only politics can turn most of those solutions into reality”.³ Politics, more than analyses, determine policies.^{2,3}

The key is to convince most people, and this is where the path becomes difficult. To gain influence on COVID-19-mitigating policy, public health scientists have to play politics—that is, fight opponents with competing interests that are blocking healthy public policy,⁴ account for bounded rationality, convince key players, practice lobbying through interest groups, and make elected leaders serve their agenda. Public health science will never be enough.

I declare no competing interests.

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