



NARAL
Pro-Choice America

The Bush Administration: Putting Far-Right Ideology Before Science and Public Health

“Anything that doesn’t fit into the [Bush administration’s] ideological, theological or political agenda is ignored, marginalized, or simply buried.”

- Dr. Richard Carmona, U.S. Surgeon General 2002-2006

Since his first months in office, President Bush and his administration have politicized public health and subverted science in favor of an ideological agenda on a range of health issues. President Bush has used all the powers of his presidency to obstruct scientific research, censor factual medical information, and stack scientific advisory committees with right-wing ideologues. The intrusion of politics into science under this administration presents a disturbing pattern:

- **Plan B®:** For more than three years, George Bush’s political appointees at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) denied women over-the-counter access to the emergency contraceptive pill Plan B®. In rejecting the original application, the FDA ignored: 1) research proving emergency contraception to be safe and effective for women of all reproductive ages, 2) the overwhelming (23-4) recommendation of its own hand-picked scientific advisory committees, 3) the opinions of more than 70 of the nation’s leading medical and public-health organizations, and 4) the advice of its own professional staff. FDA observers called the agency’s decision “extremely uncommon, if not unprecedented,” and a report released in November 2005 by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the FDA did not follow its normal procedures in making the scientific assessment of the Plan B® proposal. Anti-choice lawmakers and groups made repeated false claims about the safe, effective drug – and the White House bent to their demands, putting politics above Americans’ right to an independent, reliable, and apolitical drug-approval process. Finally, bending to political pressure, in August 2006 the FDA approved over-the-counter sales of Plan B® but only for individuals ages 18 and older.
- **Stem-cell research:** In August 2001, President Bush banned federal funding for research on all new embryonic stem-cell lines. As a consequence, the Bush policy has severely limited the number of stem-cell lines available for research that scientists believe could lead to breakthroughs in treatment for diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, cancer, diabetes, and more. Following his divisive stem-cell decision, President Bush created a Council on Bioethics to advise him on all research-related issues. He appointed the controversial Dr. Leon Kass – a vocal opponent of in-vitro fertilization, legal abortion,

and embryonic stem-cell research – as the panel’s chairman, leading many to conclude that the panel’s direction was predestined. Calling into further question the council’s objectivity, in February 2004 President Bush dismissed, without warning, two members who were outspoken advocates for stem-cell research and replaced them with three new members with views more similar to his own. Dismissed councilmember and esteemed scientist Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn is quoted as saying, “I think this is Bush stacking the council with the compliant.” The council has produced recommendations that may have sweeping effects on a range of areas of scientific inquiry, from reproductive technologies to embryo research.

In July 2006, and again in June 2007, Congress passed legislation with broad public support to allow for federally funded research using stem cells derived from embryos donated voluntarily by fertility-treatment patients. Unfortunately, the president issued his first and third vetoes in office to prevent this potentially life-saving measure from becoming law.

- **Abortion and breast cancer myth:** Bowing to political pressure from anti-choice lawmakers, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in 2002 removed from its website a fact sheet disputing an anti-choice claim that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer. The NCI fact sheet – which summarized existing scientific data – had been the subject of anti-choice criticism since it was posted in 1997. Early in 2002, 28 anti-choice lawmakers led by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) began lobbying the Bush administration to remove the fact sheet. Shortly after these lawmakers sent a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, NCI removed the fact sheet, underscoring the administration's willingness to censor scientific and medical information for the sake of anti-choice politics. NCI replaced the fact sheet with a “revised” version that more closely reflects the misinformation propagated by the anti-choice movement, despite a lack of credible scientific evidence to substantiate such a claim. The “revised” fact sheet was posted on the NCI website in late 2002. In early 2003, a panel of scientists convened by NCI to study the matter reiterated that there is no association between abortion and breast cancer, compelling NCI to correct the fact sheet. In addition, this multi-pronged campaign to frighten women has unfolded at the state level, where some state laws and health departments’ websites have continued to disseminate this misinformation.
- **Condoms and sex education:** In July 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) removed a comprehensive condom fact sheet posted on its website and replaced it over a year later with a “revised” version that encourages an “abstinence-only” approach in line with the Bush administration’s “abstinence-unless-married” agenda. While promoting abstinence, the document omits important information about condoms’ efficacy, their proper usage, and studies showing that sex education does not lead to increased sexual activity.

- **Government website:** In March 2005, the Department of Health and Human Services partnered with an organization with ties to the right wing to continue its promotion of misinformation through another fear-based “abstinence-only-until-marriage” campaign, this time in the form of a website (www.4parents.gov) geared toward helping parents talk to teens about sex. The government-sponsored website contains a number of errors and biases that undermine its intent – including distorted information about the effectiveness of contraceptives – prompting nearly 150 public health and advocacy organizations to request that the government take it down immediately and have its contents reviewed by a panel of credentialed experts. Most recently, in July 2007, the website was revised to include more misleading and biased claims – telling parents, for example, that “abortions can have complications” and that abortion may have negative health consequences such as depression and substance abuse.
- **“Abstinence-only programs:”** President Bush has tried to eliminate scores of federal programs, claiming they are untested and unproven. Yet since his first presidential campaign, he has relentlessly promoted “abstinence-unless-married” programs as a substitute for honest sex education. His budget requests have included unprecedented funding jumps for these discredited programs that, by law, must censor any discussion of contraception or condoms except mention of their failure rates. In April 2007, the independent research firm Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. released a study – commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – that concluded that students in “abstinence-only” programs are no more likely to abstain from sex, delay initiation of sex, or have fewer sexual partners than students who receive no sex education at all. Moreover, in December 2004, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) published an investigative report which revealed that many federally funded “abstinence-only” programs contain grossly inaccurate information about important public-health issues like birth control, condoms, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV and AIDS. By contrast, not one federal program is devoted to traditional sex education, an approach which is proven effective.
- **FDA advisory committee:** In late December 2002, President Bush appointed several avowed opponents of legal abortion and contraception to the FDA's Reproductive Health Drugs Advisory Committee. The committee is charged with evaluating the safety and effectiveness of contraceptives and other drugs used in obstetrics and gynecology and was influential in the approval of mifepristone (RU 486) in 2000. One of these appointees, W. David Hager – who has advocated prayer to treat ailments such as headaches and premenstrual syndrome – in 2001 helped the anti-choice Christian Medical Association spearhead a “citizen's petition” calling for the FDA to revoke approval for mifepristone. On the panel, Hager voted against making the emergency contraceptive pill Plan B® available over the counter, despite the overwhelming majority of committee members and scientific evidence in favor of approval.

- **Sexual-assault protocol and Plan B®:** In September 2004, the Department of Justice released a national protocol for the medical examination of sexual-assault survivors. The final protocol omitted all mention of emergency contraception and its potential to help women who have suffered the trauma of a sexual assault avoid the additional trauma of an unintended pregnancy – despite reports that earlier versions had included this critical information. Timely provision of emergency contraception could help the estimated 25,000 women who become pregnant each year as a result of rape or incest avoid pregnancy, and it should be the standard of care in all hospital emergency rooms.
- **Mifepristone:** Shortly after a World Health Organization (WHO) advisory committee unanimously recommended in March 2005 that the medical abortion drug – mifepristone – be added to the agency’s essential-medicines list, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services began lobbying the WHO to block its inclusion. Safely and effectively used worldwide since 1982, and in the United States since 2000, mifepristone has the potential to prevent almost 68,000 women's deaths annually worldwide from unsafe abortion. The essential-medicines list offers official advice to governments on the basic drugs their doctors should have available. As such, it ought to be free from anti-choice politics.
- **Embryo “rights”:** In October 2002, the Bush administration directed the Health and Human Services Secretary’s Advisory Commission on Human Research Protections to classify embryos as “human subjects.” By elevating the “rights” of embryos, this action not only helps establish a legal pathway to restricting women's reproductive freedom, but also has potential consequences for vital biomedical research and health services. Research on Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, spinal-cord injuries, stroke, burns, heart disease, and reproductive-health technologies such as in-vitro fertilization are all potentially at risk.
- **NIH “hit list:”** In October 2003, anti-choice members of Congress developed a “hit list,” created with the help of anti-choice advocates, of more than 150 scientists funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) whose research on topics such as sexual behavior they found objectionable. In response, NIH began contacting researchers to notify them that questions were being raised about their work and to warn them that their research may receive special scrutiny. Earlier in that year, *The New York Times* reported that officials at NIH had warned scientists who study HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases to keep certain words and phrases out of their grant applications, including “gay,” “men who sleep with men,” “sex workers,” and “needle exchange,” so as not to provoke social conservatives. An NIH official said researchers had long been advised to avoid controversial phrases, but the degree of scrutiny under the Bush administration was “much worse and more intense.” Such campaigns to intimidate researchers threaten the integrity of the scientific review process and the future of scientific research in important public-health areas.

- **CDC advisory committee:** In March 2002, President Bush appointed Joe McIlhaney, the founder of an abstinence-only advocacy group, to serve on the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. In February 2003, the president appointed McIlhaney to yet another post – this time, the Advisory Committee to the Director of the CDC. Contradicting the views of virtually every responsible medical and public-health organization, McIlhaney is a long-time opponent of sex education, going so far as to testify against it in Congress. He specifically argued that such programs are not proven effective, despite the fact that research available at the time of his testimony contradicted his claim. (A 2001 and 2007 review of such programs by respected researcher Dr. Douglas Kirby concluded that sex-and HIV-education programs that discuss both abstinence and contraception are best.) McIlhaney now serves on the panel recommending policy to perhaps the world’s premier disease-prevention agency.
- **Global-health conference:** Succumbing to political pressure from anti-choice activists, in April 2004 the Bush administration rescinded financial support for a public-health conference on global-health issues. The conference included perspectives on youth-health issues from a variety of organizations, and (as is often the case) some speakers had positions that differ from President Bush’s in the area of reproductive health. The conference sponsor, Global Health Council, received federal funding for its annual conference for the previous 30 years. Now, however, the president appears to be subjecting an event’s speakers to an ideological litmus test, and by doing so, is crippling efforts to disseminate information on important public-health issues.
- **CDC conference on STD prevention:** In May 2006, the Bush administration inserted itself into the peer-review process of a major scientific meeting and stacked a panel reviewing abstinence-only programs at the CDC’s National STD Prevention Conference with participants favorable to the president’s policies. After learning of the panel – which was originally titled “Are Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs a Threat to Public Health?” and later renamed “Public Health Strategies of Abstinence Programs for Youth” - HHS officials contacted the CDC and within days two panel members were replaced by “abstinence-only” supporters, neither of whom was vetted through the peer-review process required of other participants. “At the CDC, they’re beside themselves,” said Jonathan Zenilman, chief of Infectious Diseases Division at Johns Hopkins University, president of the American Sexually Transmitted Diseases Association, and conference organizer. “These people aren’t scientists; they haven’t written anything. The only reason they’re here is because of political pressure from the administration.”
- **HHS report:** In December 2003, the Bush administration’s Department of Health and Human Services released its National Healthcare Disparities Report – but notably missing were key conclusions included in an earlier draft that disparities in health care are “national problems” that are “pervasive in our health care system” and carry a significant “personal and societal price.” The draft, written by HHS scientists and

apolitical policy experts, was apparently watered down after it was reviewed by political appointees, revealing yet another manipulation of science by this administration when it comes to national health policy.

Medical evidence, not politics, should form the underpinnings of scientific and public-health-related policies. Scientific credentials, not ideology, should govern appointments to scientific advisory committees. The Bush administration's history of censorship, misleading statements, unabashed scientific revisionism, and targeted intrusions into scientific decision-making processes casts doubt on the credibility of American science and compromises our ability to understand, prevent, and treat diseases. The growing influence of ideology on science is cause for grave concern. Simply put: the Bush administration is playing politics with people's health.

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