



# How science will save the world

BY DAVID DRIESEN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 12/16/20 02:00 PM EST  
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Before the government used modern science, life for most people was, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Hobbes, nasty, brutish, and short. If we fail to use modern science to ward off disasters such as pandemics and the climate crisis, then we will head back to that awful state.

The biographies of the Founding Fathers discuss sorrow from the deaths of at least one of their children. Even in the early 20th century, 10 percent of children died before the age of one, and the rate touched 30 percent in some cities. Women often died giving birth. The average age of death was well under 50 before the 20th century. But death would often be a mercy. Before the discovery of anesthesia, surgery would bring on excruciating pain. Many people who survived polio and other diseases also suffered paralysis or other debilitating afflictions most of their lives.

It is often said that 20th century advances changed the dire conditions that hounded mankind for millennia. But that is only half the story. The government increased life expectancy, protected children, and reduced suffering by using the advances that made longer and less painful lives possible. The discovery of a successful polio vaccine by Jonas Salk did not instantly eradicate the disease. But Franklin Roosevelt, who suffered from polio his entire life, pushed to create the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, which was renamed the March of Dimes.

It sponsored a massive field trial of the polio vaccine, and the government allocated federal funds to distribute it for use. All levels of the government worked with public and private health care providers to create an effective vaccine delivery service. Only then did the number of cases of polio begin to decline. Moreover, the story is similar to other childhood diseases. The government worked for the eradication of measles, smallpox, and other afflictions that had blighted the lives of millions of people.

Environmental mandates from the government also contributed to longer and less brutal lives. For instance, municipalities improved sanitation and protected drinking water, thereby reducing waterborne diseases. When industrialization threatened these scientific advances, the government took action with massive federal funds for sewage treatment plants and the critical new programs for clean air and water in the 1970s.

In recent years, however, the government has retreated from science to save people from suffering. The coronavirus demonstrates such a failure. Countries that have consistently followed scientific advice and promoted

face masks, social distancing, and significant testing and contact tracing spared their citizens from the pandemic. However, the United States did not consistently follow scientific advice and cut short the lives of almost 300,000 citizens. The swift production of coronavirus vaccines promises relief. But their use will take government distribution plans.

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The failure to adhere to science which respects global climate disruption has also made our lives more difficult. Wildfires have ruined the air in the west and driven one million people from their homes. Intense hurricanes have disrupted thousands of people in the south with almost \$40 billion worth of damage in this year alone. The climate models predict that these dangers and many others will get much worse if we do not use science to address the climate crisis at home and around the world.

We have all the information needed to spare us from a return to the dark times. We know that we must substitute clean energy for dirty fossil fuels. The technology to do this is available and has become cheaper than the old methods. Science predicts that the climate crisis could increase the rate of infectious diseases. Science has, within the lifetimes of our older citizens, rescued us from such nasty, brutish, and short lives because the government used federal resources to promote the latest advances. If our leaders do not use science in this way, we might as well return to the dark times, when science was scarce and advances were buried.

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