

Fauci: Science as a voice of reason

Eight months into medical school, my current skill set includes an assortment of physiology and microbiology factoids and the ability to perform a well-patient exam, skills that unfortunately leave me just as helpless as the average American who waits on edge during the third week of a stay-at-home order. COVID-19 has spun our country into unprecedented times. The dozens of news cameras positioned outside my medical school, reporters lining up to speak about the first case of community spread in the country, should have alerted me weeks ago that we were entering into uncharted territory. As industries and stock markets have slowed to a crawl, many Americans, including myself, have turned to leaders for guidance—in particular, 2007 Lasker Laureate Dr. Anthony Fauci.

As the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Fauci has appeared at nearly all the White House briefings next to President Trump. His measured Brooklyn rasp and tell-it-to-me-straight demeanor have garnered the admiration of the country and even inspired fan merchandise (“Fauci” t-shirts in Gucci-style fonts), as well as generated vitriol from online conspiracy theorists (see: #FauciFraud). [1]

Through the past 40 years, Dr. Fauci has led efforts against epidemics as both a scientist and public figure. In today’s pandemic, his devotion to tempering too-rosy predictions and fearlessness in calling out testing efforts as “failing” have earned him the rarest resource of public trust. [2] When Dr. Fauci missed one White House briefing, tweets began flying, asking, “Where is Dr. Fauci?”

Dr. Fauci represents a role of physicians and scientists that has diminished in recent years: a voice of reason, “a representative of truth and facts.” [3] Historically, physicians were community keystones—they provided your care from birth to death, and all your family and friends, too. In this way, physicians and researchers have always been public figures. With the modernization and subsequent specialization of physicians and scientists, science began to be practiced in isolated and sterile environments, such as research done in the ivory tower or 15-minute appointments with a doctor your insurance assigned to you—a depersonalization and erosion of trust. Dr. Fauci’s appearance in media, particularly web content, brings us closer to the days of knowing your physician or knowing the faces of scientists and cultivating a relationship of respect. Moreover, Dr. Fauci highlights another crucial role of science, not just in times of pandemic: the essential need for scientists to dialogue with politicians, even when “you have to say things, one, two, three, four times.” [3]

The argument remains that the role of a scientist is to be quiet and do the work. Dr. Fauci has certainly done the work as a leading HIV/AIDS researcher with more than 1100 publications. But he has also leveraged his expertise into a role as a public servant, advising several presidents and designing the international health program PEPFAR for HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention, among other government programs. His advocacy helped funnel funds into implementing the interventions and research he helped discover and fostering real world change.

In his 2007 Lasker Awards Ceremony acceptance remarks, Dr. Fauci said, “I realized early on that when you deal in the heady company of presidents, cabinet secretaries and members of Congress and are asked for advice, you must be prepared to disappoint people with the truth

and risk never getting asked back into the inner circle. I accepted that concept. Science is truth, and as a scientist I told the truth.” [4]

Prior to medical school, I considered careers in print journalism and clinical research, seemingly disparate fields, but to me, both centering around truth-seeking. Dr. Fauci reminds me that truth-seeking is not absent from medicine either. It is central to it. In Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, the protagonist Dr. Rieux asks Tarrou, a community member, why he is so willing to risk his life and volunteer to fight the plague. Tarrou answers: “My code of morals... comprehension.” [5] Only by telling the truths as we know it, rooted in science and research, can we give the public and policymakers the knowledge they need to make educated decisions about their health and the health of others, and hopefully, inspire them to make the right choices.

More than ever, we need science communication education in our medical school and graduate school curriculums. It is not enough to just do the work. We need to know how to advocate for truth, how to navigate the machinations of politics, and how to build relationships with policymakers, stakeholders, and the public. In the words of Dr. Fauci, we all have to keep pushing—for policy changes that focus on preventing pandemics and chronic disease, for research advances to benefit patients in ways that are truly accessible. More than ever, our country and our patients depend on it.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/technology/coronavirus-fauci-trump-conspiracy-target.html>
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5. Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Vintage International, 1991, page 130.