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# When science is politicised

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EDITORIAL

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**The United States has long been a beacon of global medical research. However, the systematic politicisation and erosion of independent research threatens to extinguish that beacon.**



Photo: Sturlason

The United States is the world's undisputed leader when it comes to medical research. Seven of the world's ten most productive universities in the field are American, and the United States produces as much global health research as the next nine countries combined [\(1\)](#). However, the Trump administration is systematically politicising and eroding the country's independent health research.

Government-employed physicians have been silenced and no longer dare to act as peer reviewers for scientific manuscripts submitted to *Annals of Internal Medicine*, one of the most influential medical journals in the United States. The editors encounter situations like this on a daily basis [\(2\)](#). Some authors ask for their names to be removed from articles they contributed to, while others withdraw manuscripts at various stages of the publishing process. Links from medical journals to public health websites no longer work because the pages have suddenly been taken down. Physicians ask for all research correspondence to be sent to their private email address, out of fear that their work email is being monitored. The list of examples is long and is growing by the day [\(2\)](#).

**«Government-employed physicians have been silenced and no longer dare to act as peer reviewers for scientific manuscripts»**

In the BMJ, an anonymous researcher working for the US government describes the chaos and uncertainty that is permeating research environments (3). All recently recruited research assistants and doctoral and postdoctoral fellows have been dismissed without notice. The remaining researchers have to spend their time reviewing both internal and external documents in order to remove prohibited words such as *gender*, *equity* and *transgender* (3). They then have to do the same with other research groups' documents, while their own work is reviewed by others. Words like *woman*, *LGBT*, *marginalised* and *bias* are also no longer allowed (4). Datasets deemed inappropriate are systematically deleted, particularly those related to all types of sex and gender research, including maternal mortality data. Funding for universities' research overheads is being withheld. Researchers have been instructed to withdraw submitted research articles containing 'prohibited' terms such as *vulnerable groups* (4). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) web pages providing information on support for women in biomedical careers have disappeared (4). And an executive order states that even private research institutes failing to comply with the new regulations will be investigated (5).



Hundreds of academics, elected officials and their supporters gathered at Washington Square Park in Manhattan on 19 February 2025 to protest against the Trump administration and the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) freezing of public funding for scientific research. Photo: Sipa USA

The National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation (NSF) – two of the largest contributors to research funding in the United States – have already carried out substantial layoffs (6). More are expected, with the NSF likely cutting more than half of its staff (6). This includes most, if not all, of those responsible for ensuring ethical guidelines are upheld and that research is conducted properly (7). It's not as if this wasn't expected: Russell Vought, the new head of the government's Office of Management and Budget, has previously expressed a strong disdain for a 'scientific elite', which he considers 'the central and immediate threat facing the country' and one that should be 'vanquished' (6).

An editorial in *Nature* has called on researchers, institutions and organisations worldwide to show their support for US researchers – just as they have for researchers in other countries facing authoritarian leaders seeking to ban research they do not like (8).

*«The systematic politicisation of independent research is starting to have significant ramifications in the United States, and similar attempts are also being seen in European countries»*

The systematic politicisation of independent research is starting to have significant ramifications in the United States, and similar attempts are also being seen in European countries. What is frightening is the possibility that this politicisation might be fuelled by the initial success of the Trump administration: even here in Norway, some quarters are trying to politicise and stifle science (9, 10). A recent example is when Professor Joel Glover, a developmental biologist, shared knowledge from his own field of research in the *Aftenposten* newspaper (11). He was criticised by a prominent writer and sociologist who voiced support for Trump, labelling Glover's knowledge 'disinformation' and a 'problem', and questioning whether politicians 'should clean up universities here at home' (12). The latter is strikingly similar to what Trump is now doing in the United States.

Fortunately, Norwegian politicians are generally wiser than that. Because it is actually quite simple: the role of science is to shed light on a complex and difficult-to-understand world. The role of politics is to make decisions based on that insight, not to curse the light and embrace the darkness.

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