

Concern is more than just 'ruffled feathers'

If a government abuses science to justify its policies, scientists have a duty to speak out.

Sir—Your News story “Scientists slam Bush record” (*Nature* 427, 663; 2004) reports on the statement by 63 prominent scientists accusing the Bush administration of “misrepresenting and suppressing scientific knowledge”. John Marburger, the administration’s head of science and technology policy, quickly responded to the initiative from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) by dismissing the move as political and simply the result of a few individuals having their “feathers ruffled”, according to the *New York Times*.

A similar response greeted Congressman Henry Waxman’s like-minded report last August.

The administration’s response to the UCS initiative shows that nothing

short of a broad-based condemnation will deter this administration’s misuse of science.

We are PhD students and postdocs at Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley, who are attempting to publicize the widespread alarm of scientists at the Bush administration’s use of science (www.scienceinpolicy.org). We have examined a broad range of environmental issues and uncovered a pervasive pattern of misuse, suppression and contradiction of science, including that performed by the administration’s own researchers.

This is not about a few “ruffled feathers”. At the time of writing, more than 1,000 scientists, from all 50 US

states and from around the world, have signed our statement decrying the Bush administration’s misuse of science.

Many of us are publicly funded researchers who feel that, if the current US administration is abusing science to justify its policies, we have a moral responsibility to speak out.

We invite you to join in these efforts to restore scientific integrity to US policy-making.

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Health-aid efforts rely on local infrastructure

Sir—Reading your News story “The fightback starts here” (*Nature* 426, 754; 2003), it is gratifying to see that major organizations and donors are focusing on the health problems of developing countries. Perhaps improved interventions will address diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, but it is not always the lack of technologies and drugs that constitute the problem. As one who has been involved in this battle for many years, I know that improvements in basic public health are also needed.

To maximize the effect of the Global Fund and resources from other donors, a matching international and African effort is needed to refurbish basic health systems. For example, some 50 years ago malaria and tuberculosis in particular were under fairly effective control, at least outside sub-Saharan Africa. Even now, with techniques already on hand, an integrated approach involving indoor application of residual insecticides and using diagnosis and effective treatment would bring malaria under control in many countries. Proper planning and better public health is also needed to improve defective services, such as water and sanitation, which contribute so greatly to developing-world problems.

I hope that international donors will encourage the governments of afflicted countries to take specific steps: to adopt public-health principles by action rather than words; to foster and sustain local expertise in research and development; to show commitment to the well-being of the public and accept that sustainable health

programmes require long-term government support.

The issues are both political and financial, and they cannot be ignored indefinitely. Effective public-health infrastructures are essential to the health of the communities that the Global Fund and other agencies wish to assist. These donors could use their influence to ensure that governments develop and use effective health planning. Their objectives should be the rebuilding of local health infrastructures that are sustainably funded, functional and transparent in decision-making. With such changes in hand, these international efforts might have a real chance of succeeding.

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Confidential reports may improve peer review

Sir—Jean-Patrick Connerade in Correspondence (“Scandals stem from low priority of peer review” *Nature* 427, 196; 2004) offers an excellent perspective on the current status of the peer-review system.

Although I agree with his main argument that refereeing needs further recognition, I disagree with the suggestion that recent cases of misconduct, plagiarism and other problems arise from the low priority of peer review.

Most referees are indeed very busy, but there are good and competent scientists who still provide a critical,

detailed and timely analysis. Last-minute and ill-conceived reports are unjustified, because there is no obligation to act as a referee. In their letters to reviewers, editors always point out that the potential referee should decline if they are unable to reply in a timely fashion.

It’s true that peer review is time-consuming, but information provided by editorial offices about individual reviewers could become an additional and useful measure of a scientist’s professional qualifications.

Some journals already do this. For example, the Royal Society of Chemistry has for many years provided annual confidential reports to its referees that list the papers refereed for each journal, the referee’s recommendation in every case, and the final outcome. Not only does this provide useful feedback for the reviewers, it can help to normalize reviewing standards and even improve the quality and speed of assessments. The Royal Society of Chemistry is currently updating its system so that reviewers will be able to access this confidential information online.

As more and more journals develop electronic systems of publication and record-keeping, this sort of information should be easy for them to provide.

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