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Fantasy politics

A US congressional investigation has distorted the truth about research that uses human fetal tissue — and sets a troubling precedent.

A stunning and potentially influential science-fiction story was published last week. You might have read it. This dystopian tale reimagined the history of vaccine development, and then predicted a bizarre future disconnected from its past. The tale portrayed an altered vision of the scientific enterprise itself: one in which, by applying cognitive dissonance, the basic research that underlies a technological advance can be dismissed even as the advance itself is celebrated.

Like all the best science fiction, the story took the real world and gave it a twist. So, animal models became perfect surrogates for understanding the human body. The only valuable science was judged to be popular and heavily cited science. And researchers had to justify to politicians the value and necessity of their science before being allowed to pick up their pipettes and begin an experiment.

The authors of this fantasy were the Republicans who were part of a US congressional investigation into the use of tissue from aborted human fetuses for research — informally known as the Select Investigative Panel on Infant Lives (see <http://doi.org/bwzq>). And the result would be funny if it weren't so serious.

The stated intent of these elected officials was to investigate statements, made by dozens of universities and other organizations, that work with this controversial material is important to the development of new vaccines and therapies. In doing so, the officials applied their own, distorted, vision of how science works, and then concluded that dozens of scientific societies and other institutions had made false claims in the name of self-interest. (Democrats on the investigation produced a separate report that did not reach the same conclusion.)

Of course, institutions and scientists are not immune to conflicts of interest and acts of self-preservation. But the Republicans' investigative report shows a careless — or perhaps all too careful — disregard for facts and history. Such a report should be an aberration. There are concerns that it will not be.

The way in which the Republican report distorts science will be familiar to veterans of climate-change politics. But it should still alarm researchers to see how this misleading approach has spread, and it is especially worrying given the political changes ahead for the United States.

President-elect Donald Trump could embolden the anti-science lawmakers in Congress to 'investigate' other areas of controversial research. As such, it would not be totally paranoid to worry that the report released last week, the culmination of a year-long, nearly US\$1.6-million investigation, is a taste of things to come.

The use of fetal tissue from abortions is a prime target for politics in the United States, where access to abortion is a perennial political issue. The investigation was launched after a series of undercover videos showed employees of women's abortion clinics and companies that distribute fetal tissue for research discussing the procedures they use for collecting the tissue and the fees they

charge for the service. It gave those opposed to abortion a new way of attacking those who provide such tissue.

In which other directions could this damaging and partisan interference spread? Biologists remember the struggle to access embryonic stem cells during former President George W. Bush's term in office. Fears are mounting that this attack will be renewed.

The Republicans' report on fetal-tissue research harked back to the old arguments about embryonic stem cells — the familiar, evidence-free mantra that convenient alternatives can easily replace a controversial source of material. (Despite the open hostility, there was never a congressional investigation into the use of embryonic stem cells.) The report also went a step further, rewriting the long history of the role of human fetal-tissue research in vaccine and therapy development, and even directly attacking one researcher for his vocal support of the research.

Such an attack has two goals: to discredit one man's testimony before Congress, and to deter others from speaking up. It is important for the scientific community to rally round those who would speak up to defend research. Let us hope that this report is an isolated incident. Even so, researchers should prepare for more of the same. ■

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Natural language

The latest attempt to brand green practices is better than it sounds.

According to book publishers, there has been a surge of interest in writing and reading about nature. Something about the way people live in our modern world, they say, encourages readers to seek reconnection with the great outdoors and its inhabitants. But to use words to convey the beauty and tragedy of the environment beyond direct human experience — and to do it well — is a rare skill indeed.

That perhaps helps to explain the clunky and chewy terminology crudely attached to efforts to preserve and protect the natural world. If a picture truly paints a thousand words, then none of them is likely to be 'ecosystem services'. Equally, 'green-blue infrastructure' and 'natural capital' set few hearts aflutter. So what are we to make of the newcomer to this lexicon of ecology: 'nature-based solutions'?

NBS — as almost no one yet calls it — is a newly coined umbrella term intended to sweep up all of the above phrases, add others such as 'ecological engineering' and 'ecosystem-based mitigation', and dump