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NEWS

Sixty seconds on . . . following the science

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Sounds like a sensible approach

Evidence based policy does feel rather important during a pandemic. But government ministers' recent parroting of the phrase "we're following the science" has raised some concerns.

Surely this is an improvement on "we've had enough of experts"?

True. But there's a growing feeling that the mantra is being used by ministers to deflect scrutiny of their handling of the covid-19 pandemic, rather than as a meaningful explanation of policy making.

Is this the political equivalent of saying "not me, guv"?

That's the nub. At a Science Media Centre briefing on 18 May, the broadcaster and physicist Brian Cox said that while science should inform policy, it is not its job to decide it. "It almost seems like a defence that some ministers have been coached to deploy when asked a difficult question," he said, with a metaphorical stroke of the chin.

Things can only get better

The scientific community is worried that if we continue with the current approach, "the science" could be blamed if things go awry, and public trust could be damaged as a result.

Cox called for politicians to embrace the "uncertainty and humility" around scientific discovery and communicate this with transparency to the public.

But won't this get in the way of vacuous sloganeering?

Alas, it might. But Cox argues that a straightforward response to a difficult question is too simplistic and does science a disservice by characterising it as an amorphous blob rather than a nuanced and constantly evolving body of evidence.

So, what should ministers be saying?

According to Cox, they could try saying, "We listened to the science and the advice carefully—some of which may have been necessarily contradictory because nobody knows everything about this virus and how it spreads—and then we took responsibility and made a decision based on those discussions and other considerations." Let's hope Mr Hancock and company are taking notes.

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