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Big chunks of the history of the Covid pandemic were rewritten over the last month or so in a way that will have terrible consequences for many years to come.

Under questioning by a congressional subcommittee, top officials from the National Institutes of Health, along with Dr. Anthony Fauci, acknowledged that some key parts of the public health guidance their agencies promoted during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic were not backed up by solid science. What’s more, inconvenient information was kept from the public — suppressed, denied or disparaged as crackpot nonsense.

Remember the rule that we should all stay at least six feet apart? “It sort of just appeared,” Fauci said during a [preliminary interview](#) for the subcommittee

hearing, adding that he “was not aware of any studies” that supported it. Remember the insistence that the virus was primarily spread by droplets that quickly fell to the floor? During his recent public hearing, he acknowledged that to the contrary, the virus is airborne.

As for the repeated assertion that Covid originated in a “wet market” in Wuhan, China, not in an infectious diseases laboratory there, N.I.H. officials were privately [expressing alarm](#) over that lab’s lax biosafety practices and risky research. In his public testimony, Fauci conceded that even now there “has not been definitive proof one way or the other” of Covid-19’s origins.

Officials didn’t just spread these dubious ideas, they also demeaned anyone who dared [to question them](#). “[Dr. Fauci Throws Cold Water on Conspiracy Theory That Coronavirus Was Created in a Chinese Lab](#)” was one typical headline. At the hearings, it emerged that Dr. David Morens, a senior N.I.H. figure, was deleting emails that discussed pandemic origins and using his personal account [so as to avoid public oversight](#). “We’re all smart enough to know to never have smoking guns, and if we did we wouldn’t put them in emails and if we found them we’d delete them,” [he wrote](#) to the head of a nonprofit involved in research at the Wuhan lab.

I wish I could say these were all just examples of the science evolving in real time, but they actually demonstrate obstinacy, arrogance and cowardice. Instead of circling the wagons, these officials should have been responsibly and transparently informing the public to the best of their knowledge and abilities.

Their delays, falsehoods and misrepresentations had terrible real-time effects on the lives of Americans. Failure to acknowledge the basic facts of Covid transmission led the authorities to pointlessly close beaches and parks, leaving city dwellers to huddle in the much more dangerous confines of cramped and poorly ventilated apartments. The same failure also delayed the opening of schools and caused untold millions of dollars to be wasted on plexiglass barriers (that [likely made things worse](#)) rather than effective air filters that would have helped kids to return to one another’s company.

Beaches and schools are open again, but the most severe ramifications of these failures may last for decades, because they gave people cause to doubt the word of scientific and public health authorities.

If the government misled people about how Covid is transmitted, why would Americans believe what it says about vaccines or bird flu or H.I.V.? How should people distinguish between wild conspiracy theories and actual conspiracies?

I started reporting on Covid [in February 2020](#). It was already clear that a catastrophe was hurtling toward us. But people who took that fact seriously were often pooh-poohed as alarmist, doomers or preppers because many health officials were, at that point, downplaying the threat.

The next month, startled by the official claims that masks were harmful, [I begged the authorities](#) to level with the public about the potential benefits of masking rather than seemingly tailoring their message to avoid panic over the supply shortage. That strategy, I noted, was sure to backfire — as it did.

The questions around masks led me to the six-foot rule and the debate over how Covid was spread. “FACT CHECK: Covid-19 is NOT airborne,” the World Health Organization [declared on social media](#) — even though SARS, a virus very much like Covid, had long since been understood to be airborne. Frustrated [scientists pleaded](#) with the C.D.C. and the W.H.O. to take into account the new evidence. By the way, as of this writing, that “FACT CHECK” post is still up.

I later [implored](#) the authorities to open parks (that was April 2020) as well as to [recognize](#) airborne transmission and the protective effect of ventilation and to [stop shaming people](#) for going to the beach (both July 2020). I even joined some of those scientists [to write articles in](#) peer-reviewed scientific journals.

But as I reported on these topics, one theme kept coming up: High-level officials were afraid to tell the truth — or just to admit that they didn’t have all the answers — lest they spook the public.

It emerged during these congressional hearings that U.S. scientific authorities had no idea what viruses the Wuhan lab was using or what work it was doing. So how could they issue all those confident assurances?

The hearings occasionally turned into a clown show, with some lawmakers looking to score cheap political points. But others pulled their punches, no doubt worried about validating the misinformation that swirls around these issues. This attitude reflects a fundamental and very dangerous misunderstanding.

Misinformation is not something that can be overcome solely by spelling out facts just the right way. Defeating it requires [earning and keeping the public's trust](#).

During Fauci's testimony this week, Representative Kweisi Mfume brought up the Tuskegee experiment, in which Black men with syphilis were denied treatment so doctors could study how the disease progressed. Ironically, he claimed they were deliberately injected with syphilis — which is false, and a conspiracy theory, but that fact check is irrelevant to the main question: Can vulnerable populations trust that the medical establishment will inform and protect them?

During the pandemic, research showed that many African Americans were reluctant to get vaccines, but it wasn't because [they were all Covid denialists](#). Many were continuing to take precautions such as wearing masks and avoiding crowds. They just didn't trust that scientists had leveled with the public about the risks of vaccination.

When I visited London in 2021, I was amazed that people didn't generally know which vaccine they had taken or when they would get their booster. They answered my question with a shrug and said they would just go whenever they were told they had an appointment. They, too, had a polarizing, Trump-like leader and the usual swirl of social media conspiracies. But they rolled up their sleeves when the National Health Service called because it was cashing in the trust it had built over decades.

It was the same for me, here in the U.S.: When I broke my strict isolation to volunteer at a vaccine clinic early in the pandemic and later, when I gleefully rolled up my own sleeve, I was elated but not because I had personally verified every single claim about vaccines. Instead, I felt I had reason to trust that the manufacturer hadn't cheated in the trials, that the scientists overseeing the process weren't corrupt and that if something untoward had happened, it wouldn't have been covered up. I trusted that the vials were properly filled and handled, and that the nurse had injected them appropriately.

Trust, not information, was the key. But just when it was needed most, some of the officials in charge of our Covid response undermined it. And as Deborah Ross, a Democratic member of the House from North Carolina, [said during the hearings](#), “When people don't trust scientists, they don't trust the science.” And studies have shown that once people lose trust in institutions, they become

more open to conspiracy theories — not just about whatever specific topic might be in dispute, but across the board.

Opportunists and “do your own research” chaos agents will take advantage of these lapses for a long time to come, fueling conspiracy theories and bad ideas of every stripe. The newest one I’ve heard is that Covid is ravaging people’s immune systems on a mass scale comparable to that of H.I.V. On what authority can such a falsehood now be debunked?

As the expression goes, trust is built in drops and lost in buckets, and this bucket is going to take a very long time to refill.

I hope the pandemic, both as lived experience and now as rewritten history, has proved that paternalistic, infantilizing messaging backfires. Transparency and accountability work.

In the four-plus years since Covid emerged, millions of people died, but so did something harder to quantify: the trust of a great many people in the science of public health. The authorities will have to live with the consequences, and so, unfortunately, will all the rest of us.

Good for Zeynep for putting this out there so baldly. It was clear from the beginning that our public health officials were over-matched, especially as COVID-19 slammed into Wuhan, then Milan, Italy, and New York City. That this might sweep across continents was frightening. Fortunately, in hindsight, circumstances local to Milan and New York, or accentuated there, seem to have accelerated the coronavirus’s spread and toll taken.

In Canada, our senior health officer derided masks at first, then flipped. How she has kept her position is not encouraging. We got caught by having underfunded and downgraded public health for decades; not-the-most-competent people accumulated in such offices, and rose to the top. Then an unprecedented pandemic exposed both their limitations and the weak systems they had to work with. Were the politicians and senior public servants who hired them going to admit their roles in this? Would it have been fair to public health officers? Would it have helped the cause to call out Public Health in our hour of darkest need struggling in real time?

What makes this worse are all the deniers poised to exploit this failure, this pathetic “humanness.” But if they had been in charge the outcome would have been far worse, and the incompetence off the charts. TJB