AAAS Runs Dishonest Glyphosate Story, Then Deletes It. Is Politics to Blame?

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 5, 2019

The AAAS, which stands for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is one of the foremost pro-science organizations in the world. Not only does it advocate for good science and science policy, it publishes the prestigious journal Science, read by millions of scientists around the world.

Unfortunately, AAAS has gotten a bit weird in recent months. A warning flag popped up in June 2018 when the general news arm of Science republished an article from an environmental activist website which repeated some dubious claims about "chemicals." At the time, we warned [2] that this "very strange editorial decision... could potentially harm its reputation."

Indeed. Now, they've really stepped in it.

AAAS Runs Dishonest Glyphosate Story, Then Deletes It

Yesterday, AAAS issued a press release (since deleted, but forever available [3]) about how the organization gave the 2019 "AAAS Scientific Freedom & Responsibility Award" to two researchers "who battled powerful corporate interests to uncover the deadly effects of industrial herbicides" that caused "a kidney disease epidemic that has claimed tens of thousands of lives in their home country of Sri Lanka and around the world."

Wow. That's quite the conspiracy they uncovered. Powerful corporate interests and tens of thousands of dead bodies. What was the cause of all that?
According to AAAS, glyphosate.*

What's the evidence for that extraordinary claim? Well, there isn't any. As Dr. Kevin Folta explains [4] for the Genetic Literacy Project, it's a testable yet unproven hypothesis based on the work of the two researchers whom the AAAS is honoring. But here's the rub: Their research, which is based in Sri Lanka, is confounded by the fact that heavy metal contamination is rampant throughout the country. And there is evidence [5] linking cadmium exposure to chronic kidney disease.

Dr. Folta rightly concludes, "While the authors are appropriately conservative in their conclusions, the AAAS website seems to be pretty certain, especially about the 'lethal' herbicide."

Apparently, Dr. Folta's article had an impact. AAAS deleted the press release. It's unclear if the organization still plans to give an award to the two researchers.

**If AAAS Becomes Political, Science in America Will Suffer**

There's really no nice way to put this. The AAAS has severely damaged its own reputation. This was a self-inflicted gunshot wound. What on Earth were they thinking?

We can only speculate, but it's difficult to avoid wondering if the organization's relatively new CEO has something to do with it. In 2015, AAAS named Rush Holt, a PhD physicist, as its head. That part of his résumé is impeccable and beyond reproach, but this part is not: Dr. Holt is a former Congressman, which means he was (is?) an active player in partisan politics. Just as a matter of public perception, AAAS's choice of Dr. Holt as its CEO was probably a mistake.

The best way to destroy science is to put a politician in charge of it. Let's hope that's not what happens at AAAS, because if it does, science will suffer in America and around the world.

*Note: It is worth pointing out that AAAS's flagship journal, Science, has published articles in favor of glyphosate (for example, this one [6]), making this entire saga even weirder.