

Junk Science: When Buried Research Kills People

The *New York Times* last month [reported](#) on a study completed in 1973, the results of which had gone unpublished until recently.

The story, headlined “A Study on Fats That Doesn’t Fit the Story Line,” explored a five-year double blind randomized controlled trial—the best method to determine if one thing causes another, according to *Times* reporter Aaron E. Carroll—designed to test whether saturated fats were more harmful than unsaturated fats.

The results?

Researchers found no evidence indicating that people who reduced saturated fats from their diet experienced health benefits. (This probably [comes as no surprise](#) to *Intellectual Takeout* readers.)

In fact, Carroll reports, “there seemed to be an *increased mortality rate* in those on the ‘heart healthy’ diet, particularly among those 65 years and older.” (Italics mine)

It gets worse. A meta-analysis of all available studies found that more people died on diets consisting of fewer saturated fats (though the results were not statistically significant).

This is deeply troubling. For decades, doctors and governments gave health advice to patients and the public as important research lay dormant. At best, if the findings are accurate, that advice was useless; at worst, the advice killed thousands of people. (Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S.)

Why was the research not published? Carroll addresses this question:

It’s possible that modern computer technology allows us to do analyses that couldn’t be performed then. It’s possible that researchers tried, but were unable to get the results published.

But it's also possible that these results were marginalized because they didn't fit with what was considered to be "truth" at the time. The two principal investigators on the Minnesota study were [Ivan Frantz](#) and Ancel Keys, the latter of whom may be the most influential scientist in promoting saturated fat as the enemy of heart health. (Mr. Keys [died](#) in 2004.)

Carroll (kindly) suggests that the researchers might have believed that the results were flawed and rationalized that burying the findings might save lives.

It's also possible that the scientists opted to bury the research because it did not dovetail with their previous findings and/or the conventional wisdom at the time. One cannot help but wonder if Keys would have received [this glowing obit in the NYT](#) had he early in his career published findings that ran counter to what turned out to be his life work.

Carroll notes the study's revelation has fueled "the growing concern that when it comes to nutrition, personal beliefs often trump science."

Indeed. But it's worth asking: Is this mindset confined to nutritional science? Why should that be the case?

Is it not possible that social scientists and—dare I say it—climate scientists and other scientists are prone to the same thinking and lured by the same [perverse incentives](#)?