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Why we trust experts in times of crisis

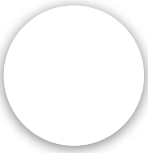
Updated / Wednesday, 25 Mar 2020 **09:53**



Dr Cillian De Gascus, Dr Tony Holohan and Dr Ronan Glynn at a Department of Health coronavirus briefing

In times of crisis, the norm is to do what the experts tell us. In times of medical crisis, listening to public health experts, and acting accordingly, becomes an ethical imperative. After the outbreak of the most serious public health emergency in living memory, governments around the world are making decisions based on advice from public health experts, and all of us ordinary citizens are told to listen to this advice and follow their directives. So far so easy.

But it gets more complicated. In Ireland and across Europe, universities and schools have closed and sporting and cultural activities have ceased. After initially dragging their feet, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have now aligned with the international consensus. What is disconcerting is that the British government was standing behind the advice of its medical chiefs, even though this advice was radically different from the experts' advice to other governments around the world. Their reluctance to take early, decisive action was bordering on the criminal. The fact that the Cheltenham Festival was allowed to proceed, and that thousands of Irish people still made the trip, was met with a mix of incredulity and alarm.



04:03

From RTÉ Radio 1's This Week, John Burke, speaks to Irish racing fans returning home from the Cheltenham races in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic

There are good epistemic and moral reasons for following the advice of the experts. Most of us don't have their knowledge and we don't have time to acquire this knowledge. To assume that we know better than an expert is an act of foolish hubris that can have serious consequences, even deadly ones.

The knowledge of experts is passed on to us through their testimony, but the layperson is not in a position to evaluate the validity of these testimonies. The relationship between the expert and the ordinary citizen is fundamentally one of trust. But trust has a different epistemic status than knowledge. As philosopher John Hardwig once said, when a layperson relies on an expert, that reliance is necessarily "blind" because a layperson cannot be rationally justified in trusting an expert.

While Hardwig's claim is perhaps too strong, it raises an important question. We trust experts because they are experts and we are not, but what is our trust in the experts based on? Often this trust is based on a second-level trust: we trust experts because other people we trust tell us that we can trust the experts in question. In terms of the coronavirus pandemic, we trust public health experts because our government, our GPs, our favourite commentators in the media and our neighbour with a degree in one of the sciences tell us that we can trust the experts.

14:11

From RTÉ Radio 1's This Week on March 8th last, experts Susan Mitchell (Business Post health editor), Sam McConkey (Head of the Department of International Health and Tropical Medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland) and Tarik Jašarevic (World Health Organization) discuss the coronavirus outbreak

We now face two problems: what happens when experts disagree, and what happens if we don't have much trust in the people who trust the experts? Disagreement amongst experts is more common than we think, even amongst scientists. Ireland is one of the global leaders on research on this issue, with the H2020 research project on Policy Expertise and Trust in Action lead by Maria Baghramian of UCD and Luke Drury from the Dublin Institute of Advanced Study.

The fact that experts disagree is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, as John Stuart Mill reminded us, the last thing we want is to be dogmatic about the truth. Without diversity of opinion, "the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect ….. the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good". It's a good thing for our views to be challenged, even if one happens to be an expert.

In terms of the coronavirus pandemic, experts agree on many things, like the necessity for everyone to wash their hands and the imperative of physical and social distancing. But experts also seem to disagree on other things, such as when is the best time to enforce measures to restrict movement, or how to flatten the curve of infections rather than merely delaying the peak.

> *The fact that experts disagree is not necessarily a bad thing*

Added to this, since we all know that knowledge is power, experts' opinions are filtered or interpreted by politicians. Our trust in politicians is not the same as our trust in

scientists. It wouldn't be the first time that politicians distort the advice they get from experts for political gain or convenience. US president Donald Trump's refusal to commit to following the advice of his health experts, on the basis that America "wasn't built to be shut down", is a stark reminder of the precarious link between ordinary citizens, politicians and experts.

The coronavirus pandemic has been compared to a state of war, and so our experts must play a determining role, and we must trust them. But even in times of crisis, there is still scope for individual responsibility. The fact that there were no travel restrictions, and that large group gatherings were until recently not prohibited, is no excuse for going to the Cheltenham races or meeting friends in the pub. That is morally reckless behaviour, which cannot be excused merely because experts or government officials did not prohibit it. Coronavirus is highly contagious, but so is stupidity, and they are equally deadly.

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