

Post

# Michael Crichton Explains Why There Is ‘no Such Thing as Consensus Science’

By Mark J. Perry

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Do a Google search for the term “[global warming consensus](#)” and you’ll find more than 24,000 links (and more than [19,000,000 results](#) without the quotations marks). The first link for “global warming consensus” is to this [NASA webpage](#) with the title “Scientific Consensus” and the following statement:

Multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that 97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists agree: Climate-warming trends over the past century are extremely likely due to human activities. In addition, most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.

Here’s what [Michael Crichton](#) had to say about “scientific consensus” back in 2003 when he gave a lecture at the California Institute of Technology titled “[Aliens Cause Global Warming](#)” (emphasis mine):

I want to pause here and talk about this notion of consensus, and the rise of what has been called consensus science. I regard consensus science as an extremely pernicious development that ought to be stopped cold in its tracks. Historically, the claim of consensus has been the first refuge of scoundrels; it is a way to avoid debate by claiming that the matter is already settled. Whenever you hear the consensus of scientists agrees on something or other, reach for your wallet, because you’re being had.

Let’s be clear: **the work of science has nothing whatever to do with consensus. Consensus is the business of politics.** Science, on the contrary, requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable by reference to the real world. **In science consensus is irrelevant. What is relevant is reproducible results. The greatest scientists in history are great precisely because they broke with the consensus. There is no such thing as consensus science. If it’s consensus, it isn’t science. If it’s science, it isn’t consensus. Period.**

In addition, let me remind you that the track record of the consensus is nothing to be proud of. Let’s review a few cases. In past centuries, the greatest killer of women was fever following childbirth. One woman in six died of this fever. In 1795, Alexander Gordon of Aberdeen suggested that the fevers were infectious processes, and he was able to cure them. The consensus said no.

In 1843, Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed puerperal fever was contagious, and presented compelling evidence. The consensus said no.

In 1849, Semmelweis demonstrated that sanitary techniques virtually eliminated puerperal fever in hospitals under his management. The consensus said he was a Jew, ignored him, and dismissed him from his post. There was in

fact no agreement on puerperal fever until the start of the twentieth century. Thus the consensus took one hundred and twenty five years to arrive at the right conclusion despite the efforts of the prominent “skeptics” around the world, skeptics who were demeaned and ignored. And despite the constant ongoing deaths of women.

There is no shortage of other examples. In the 1920s in America, tens of thousands of people, mostly poor, were dying of a disease called pellagra. The consensus of scientists said it was infectious, and what was necessary was to find the “pellagra germ.” The US government asked a brilliant young investigator, Dr. Joseph Goldberger, to find the cause. Goldberger concluded that diet was the crucial factor. The consensus remained wedded to the germ theory.

Goldberger demonstrated that he could induce the disease through diet. He demonstrated that the disease was not infectious by injecting the blood of a pellagra patient into himself, and his assistant. They and other volunteers swabbed their noses with swabs from pellagra patients, and swallowed capsules containing scabs from pellagra rashes in what were called “Goldberger’s filth parties.” Nobody contracted pellagra.

The consensus continued to disagree with him. There was, in addition, a social factor-southern States disliked the idea of poor diet as the cause, because it meant that social reform was required. They continued to deny it until the 1920s. Result-despite a twentieth century epidemic, the consensus took years to see the light.

Probably every schoolchild notices that South America and Africa seem to fit together rather snugly, and Alfred Wegener proposed, in 1912, that the continents had in fact drifted apart. The consensus sneered at continental drift for fifty years. The theory was most vigorously denied by the great names of geology-until 1961, when it began to seem as if the sea floors were spreading. The result: it took the consensus fifty years to acknowledge what any schoolchild sees.

And shall we go on? The examples can be multiplied endlessly. Jenner and smallpox, Pasteur and germ theory. Saccharine, margarine, repressed memory, fiber and colon cancer, hormone replacement therapy. The list of consensus errors goes on and on.

Finally, I would remind you to notice where the claim of consensus is invoked. **Consensus is invoked only in situations where the science is not solid enough.** Nobody says the consensus of scientists agrees that  $E=mc^2$ . Nobody says the consensus is that the sun is 93 million miles away. It would never occur to anyone to speak that way.

**Related:** From John Kay’s 2007 op-ed “[Science is the pursuit of the truth, not consensus](#)”:

The notion of a monolithic “science,” meaning what scientists say, is pernicious and the notion of “scientific consensus” actively so. The route to knowledge is transparency in disagreement and openness in debate. The route to truth is the pluralist expression of conflicting views in which, often not as quickly as we might like, good ideas drive out bad. There is no room in this process for any notion of “scientific consensus.”



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