

Scientific information largely ignored when forming opinions about stem cell research

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When forming attitudes about embryonic stem cell research, people are influenced by a number of things. But understanding science plays a negligible role for many people.

That's the surprising finding from a team of University of Wisconsin-Madison communications researchers who have spent the past two years studying public attitudes toward embryonic stem cell research. Reporting in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Public Opinion*, the researchers say that scientific knowledge - for many citizens - has an almost negligible effect on how favorably people regard the field.

"More knowledge is good - everybody is on the same page about that. But will that knowledge necessarily help build support for the science?" says Dietram Scheufele, a UW-Madison professor of life sciences communication and one of the paper's three authors. "The data show that no, it doesn't. It does for some groups, but definitely not for others."

Along with Dominique Brossard, a UW-Madison professor of journalism and mass communication, and graduate student Shirley Ho, Scheufele used national public opinion research to analyze how public attitudes are formed about controversial scientific issues such as nanotechnology and stem cells. What they have found again and again is that knowledge is much less important than other factors, such as religious values or deference to scientific authority.

In the case of stem cells, values turn out to be key, says Scheufele. For

respondents who reported that religion played a strong role in their lives, scientific knowledge had no effect on their attitudes toward stem cell research. But for those who claimed to be less religious, understanding the science was linked to more positive views of the research.

"Highly religious audiences are different from less religious audiences. They are looking for different things, bringing different things to the table," explains Scheufele. "It is not about providing religious audiences with more scientific information. In fact, many of them are already highly informed about stem cell research, so more information makes little difference in terms of influencing public support. And that's not good or bad. That's just what the data show."

On the other hand, a value system held by a much smaller portion of the American public works in just the opposite direction. The attitudes of individuals who are deferential to science - who tend to trust scientists and their work - are influenced by their level of scientific understanding.

Overall, says Brossard, "more understanding doesn't always change attitudes. A lot depends on people's values. And those values need to be considered carefully when we communicate with the public about these issues."

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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