

Trio offer tips for politicians on how to interpret scientific claims

November 21 2013, by Bob Yirka

(Phys.org) —William Sutherland and David Spiegelhalter, a zoologist and mathematician respectively, with the University of Cambridge in the U.K along with Mark Burgman an ecologist with the University of Melbourne, have together compiled a list of tips for politicians and policymakers—the aim is to offer a means for those in charge of governmental decision-making, a way to interpret scientific claims for themselves, rather than having to rely on others. Their list of tips has been published as a Comment piece in the journal *Nature*.

The writers contend that politicians lack the skills necessary for properly interpreting scientific claims made by those doing research, and because of that are generally not in a position to judge whether such claims are accurate. This, they say is a serious problem because the manner in which policymakers earmark funds, set up rules and either support an effort or rally against it tends to not only impact research efforts but also [public opinion](#).

At issue, is the imperfect nature of science and the humanness of those engaged in trying to understand it—a contradiction that can often lead to confusion in how to interpret results, the trio contend. The twenty tips they've come up, which include such gems as suggestions that readers understand that bias can creep into even the best research efforts or that correlation does not imply causation—a phrase heard over and over again in the scientific community, are meant to serve as a collection of warnings of what to watch out for, as much as roadmap to better understanding what is being read when trying to interpret claims made

by scientists—many of whom may have ulterior motives.

The authors clearly do not mean to offend—they readily acknowledge that [politicians](#) as a group are generally smart people, who really do want to do what's best. The problem is, they suggest, many are not willing to dig deep enough to find out what is really going on with scientific claims, or prefer to ignore evidence altogether for other political reasons. In either case, they suggest that knowledge is power, and their tips can offer just that—in the form of guidelines that can help separate the reality of scientific research results from the rhetoric.

More information: Policy: Twenty tips for interpreting scientific claims, *Nature* 503, 335–337 (21 November 2013)

[www.nature.com/news/policy-twe ... tific-claims-1.14183](http://www.nature.com/news/policy-twe...-tific-claims-1.14183)

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