

Anthony Fauci did in five minutes what Trump has failed to do for weeks

By **Robert Gebelhoff**

May 1, 2020 at 5:00 a.m. PDT

There was no hype when Anthony S. Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases relayed the outcomes of a study on a potential treatment for covid-19 on Wednesday. He didn't promise a "game-changer" or that it would be "available almost immediately." He didn't tell us a story about a man taking the drug on his deathbed and miraculously feeling better within hours.

But as he sat in the Oval Office discussing a recent trial for the drug remdesivir with all the fervor of Ferris Bueller's economics teacher, Fauci did what President Trump failed to do despite weeks of hawking unproven treatments: offer Americans a real sense of hope.

"This is really quite important," Fauci said, before going on to discuss the study's statistical significance "for the scientists who are listening." The drug, he reported, demonstrated "clear-cut, significant, positive effect in diminishing the time to recovery."

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Boy does that feel good. No, the drug is certainly not a magic bullet. The study Fauci was referencing was not the blockbuster Americans are looking for as the official coronavirus death toll blows past 60,000. The study showed no statistically significant effect on deaths, and it only demonstrated a “modest” benefit to those suffering from covid-19, reducing average recovery time from 15 to 11 days, compared with those given a placebo drug. Other studies have found less dramatic effects, so further research is needed.

But what Fauci offered was proper, science-based, authentic optimism. He communicated that this drug is a solid step in the right direction while tempering his message with the appropriate nuance that we’ve come to forget after three years under this administration. Who knew you could get so much satisfaction from such phrases as “the data needs to be further analyzed” and “this will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal”?

Shortened recovery times, Fauci told us, could mean reducing how long people spend in the hospital, possibly alleviating the disease’s stress on our health-care system. It could set a new “standard of care” for treatment, as he put it and help direct further research. Yes, we have a long way to go, but rejoice that the scientific method is trudging along.

There are some, President Trump included, who don't have much patience for this process. They see a glimmer of good news — for example, anecdotal evidence that hydroxychloroquine might be an effective drug to treat covid-19 — and become frustrated when others demand that we wait for scientists to verify it. This is understandable, given that thousands of people are dying by the day. But hope detached from science can be a perilous thing, as hydroxychloroquine's promoters have discovered.

In truth, the scientific method is not an obstacle but a solution. The purpose of science is to answer questions, and there are many questions to be answered about covid-19. That doesn't mean getting bogged down in academic bureaucracy; indeed, we should be looking for room to speed up our regulatory process whenever appropriate, given the urgency of the crisis.

But in the end, the scientific method itself has no corners to be cut. The reason Fauci's optimism is so effective is *because* it is grounded in science. It is the only way forward — even if imperfect. Trump might learn something from this: He doesn't need a miracle treatment to help Americans. He can inspire simply by acting as a cheerleader for research. And there's plenty to cheer: Just about the entire scientific world is focused on this disease; that aggregative power alone should comfort us.

Fauci, given his decades of government service, knows when to turn to the cameras and tell the public we found something. But just as important, he knows when not to talk and how to be honest with small successes. Public health, it turns out, is as much art as it is science. In the age of Trump, let's be thankful the scientist is also an artist.

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