



ALL OR NOTHING

YOU CAN'T SIMPLY PICK AND CHOOSE WHICH BRANCHES OF SCIENCE YOU WANT TO BELIEVE IN, SAYS ALISTAIR MACLENAN

In March, the UK and the US banned airline passengers bound for their airports who had boarded the plane in certain countries from carrying anything larger than a smartphone with them in the cabin. The rationale was a perceived increase in risk that those devices contained explosives.

One of the countries on the banned list was Turkey. At the time of writing, the Turkish minister of transport, maritime and communication Ahmet Arslan had argued that newly upgraded security measures now in place at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport – including the installation of two computer tomography scanners – means that Turkey should be removed from the list.

So far, so sensible. Indeed, by the time this article appears, that may have happened.

Regular readers of this column – hello Mum – will know how proud I am of the 'geo' industry. Those working in the industry strive to provide better data, technology and solutions to problems that have massive effects on the wellbeing of local and worldwide populations.

The science of location is now fundamental to most of our everyday activities. Billions rely on that information every single day. They trust the science this industry provides. Indeed, it's not an overstatement to say they trust it with their lives – would you get on a plane knowing that the GPS or charts were only accurate to three miles?

Trusting science is, on the whole, a very good idea. If you were to visit your doctor with a persistent headache and he drilled a hole in your head to release the demons that were causing it, you certainly wouldn't have a persistent headache any more – or any other feelings. But before advancements in science showed us otherwise, people believed that demons were causing your headaches so it seemed reasonable to let them out.

The science of the day was wrong. But 'scientists' accepted that and considered this 'wrongness' as a starting point, just like they do

today. Very brave people evolved their thinking and asked if something else was causing the pain. They trusted their instincts and followed the evidence from their experiments that administering certain herbs and plants to patients alleviated the symptoms and didn't lead to them bleeding to death on the floor of the surgery hut.

Bravery is as important to scientific discovery as knowledge. The Turkish government benefits from the efforts and bravery of the scientists and engineers who created those CT scanners. But in June, it also announced that it would stop teaching the science of evolution to its school children. Meanwhile, the US Environmental Protection Agency is reversing a proposed ban on the pesticide chlorpyrifos, despite a huge amount of evidence that it is extremely harmful to pregnant women and children. The UK's Michael Gove was justice secretary when he said that 'people have had enough of experts' and was education secretary when a draft version of the geography curriculum appeared that didn't mention climate change.

Science seeks to explain the world we live in and has provided observable ways of making our future existence more certain and enjoyable – geo-science is especially good at doing those things. But it is not, in the words of world renowned scientist Forrest Gump, 'a box of chocolates'. Relying only on certain science, is simply wrong. What makes computer tomography infallible but evolution a questionable theory? You simply cannot believe that the science of jet engines, Cartesian coordinates and GPS will deliver you safely on to the ground, and not believe that we are 96% chimpanzee, the climate is changing because of our activities and vaccinating your child is good, simply because that doesn't align with your personal beliefs.

We need more bravery. We need more science.

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