

Journal Times editorial: Following the science is not always easy

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We were a little stunned by recent headlines saying a “Johns Hopkins University study” had found that early COVID-19 lockdowns in Europe and the United States had barely reduced deaths — by a mere 0.2 percent.

Wow, we thought, that was a lot of effort for little gain if this is true.

We were a little surprised, too, at the Fox News accusations that there was a “full-on media blackout” on reporting the study by major news networks, including CNN, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Ditto for the New York Times, Washington Post, Associated Press, Reuters, USA Today and others who didn’t pick up on it.

The researchers, Johns Hopkins University economics professor Steve Hanke, Lund University economics professor Lars Johnung and Jonas Herby, a special advisor at Copenhagen’s Center for Political Studies, pulled no punches in their report.

“While this meta-analysis concludes that lockdowns had little to no public effects, they have imposed enormous economic and social costs where they have been adopted,” the researchers wrote. “In consequence, lockdown policies are ill-founded and should be rejected as a pandemic policy instrument.”

So how could all these major media giants ignore such news?

Perhaps they looked at it and decided independently that it didn’t pass the smell test.

Editors and journalists, far and wide, look for red flags when they come across “news” like this. And the “Johns Hopkins University study” had plenty of them.

For starters, it wasn’t a study, it was a working paper that has not been peer-reviewed, nor has it been published in a reputable medical or scientific publication. While it borrows the venerable name of Johns Hopkins, the university has not endorsed it.

It took some withering heat from Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean of the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, who told the Poynter Institute’s PolitiFact: “The working paper is not a peer-reviewed scientific study, and its authors are not medical or public health researchers. To reach their conclusion that ‘lockdowns’ had a small effect on mortality, the authors, redefined the

term ‘lockdown’ and disregarded many peer-reviewed studies. The working paper did not include new data, and serious questions have already been raised about its methodology.”

Indeed, the working paper flies in the face of previous studies that have concluded lockdowns in Europe reduced the death toll by 3.1 million people; or another from the Global Policy Lab at the University of California-Berkeley, that found lockdowns in China, the U.S., South Korea, Iran, France and Italy had averted about 62 million cases of COVID.

The “redefinition” of the word lockdown Sharfstein referred to was the decision by the researchers to expand the term to include “the imposition of at least one compulsory non-pharmaceutical intervention.”

Under that definition, a lockdown could include a government stay-at-home order, restrictions on public gatherings or even a mask-wearing mandate in public places or businesses. That’s a very broad brush.

Adding to the parade of red flags, Hanke, who is a senior fellow at the libertarian CATO Institute, “has aired opinions about lockdowns and ‘fascist’ vaccine policies on Twitter and has repeatedly elevated false claims about the pandemic,” according to PolitiFact.

That’s hardly the unbiased, objective approach we would expect from a scientific researcher.

Perhaps when it is peer-reviewed, the researchers’ work will survive and get published. Perhaps it will end up in the wastebasket.