

Politics by definition is how any group of people make decisions. Whenever a group of people come together to accomplish a goal, politics is involved. Politics is a necessary part of any society, but sometimes instead of benefitting society, it benefits a subset of society. Such was the case recently for individuals who suffer from back pain in England.

As I have discussed in previous articles, health care is not as scientific as many would believe and there is a movement to make it so. This is happening in many developed countries. I have been involved in this process on a national level for the treatment of spine related conditions, so I understand the process first hand.

The general idea is to rate the effectiveness of various treatment methods that are available for a particular condition. The ratings are typically based on the research that is available. When there is insufficient research, expert opinion is sometimes used.

One of the biggest obstacles that this Evidence Based Medicine movement faces is the entrenched beliefs of providers who often favor procedures for which there is little evidence supporting their use.

Dr. Paul Watson is a pain specialist in Britain who is working on developing scientifically based medical guidelines. The group he is working with recently reviewed the effectiveness of using spinal steroid injections for the treatment of back pain. After reviewing the available research, they concluded that this treatment was not very effective.

The problem for Dr. Watson was that he also was the president of the British Pain Society which is a group of doctors who specialize in treating pain. Many doctors in this society use steroid injections every day to treat patients who suffer with back pain. When the treatment guidelines, which concluded that for many patients these injections should not be performed, were published the members of the society became upset and forced Dr. Watson to resign.

As we face our own efforts at health care reform in this country, we would be wise to try to avoid similar events. The political process will always be involved when any group of people tries to reach some semblance of agreement on a subject. So it will be with health care.

We must do our best to let science and rational thought guide us in this endeavor. When it comes to treatment guidelines, treatments with solid research should be supported over those without. When there is little good research, then treatments that are less expensive and more safe, should be preferred to those that are more expensive and that have a higher risk for harm.