

Is science really about evidence? How convention trumps new findings on obesity and health

In 2005, Katherine Flegal, a senior scientist studying obesity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, published a [counterintuitive paper in JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association](#) ... While the researchers found that obesity was indeed linked to excess deaths, it turned out that people who were merely overweight — plump, perhaps, but not obese — were at less risk of early death than those of so-called normal weight.

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Believing Flegal’s findings to be not only wrong but dangerous, [epidemiology professor Walter] Willett and a handful of his Harvard colleagues saw it as their mission to prevent the paper — which Willett deemed “really naive” and “deeply flawed” — from being taken seriously by other scientists, practicing physicians, or the public.

For more than a decade, Flegal writes, she would find herself the target of “an aggressive campaign that included insults, errors, misinformation, behind-the-scenes gossip and maneuvers, social media posts and even complaints to my employer.” Her [upcoming] essay offers an inside look at the sometimes political nature of science — and at how hard it can be for some scientists to consider changing their minds in the face of new data.

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