

In science we trust... even if it's poppycock

Oliver Moody Science Correspondent

Coffee drinkers could add three years to their lives, and save the NHS £1 billion a year, if they make sure to stir the cup for 60 seconds to avoid increasing their inflammation and blood sugar levels, scientists say.

Scientists also said that carbon emissions could be cut by 30 tonnes a year if the use of hairdryers was limited to three minutes at a time, and that the UK could meet its climate targets if everyone stopped making so many right turns on roads.

This is all, of course, total poppycock. Yet such is the public's faith in academia — or, perhaps, such is their scepticism of the government — that they would rather put their trust in these patently ridiculous statements than in much more reasonable claims made by civil servants.

While Michael Gove suggested at the height of the Brexit referendum campaign that Britain had had enough of experts, opinion polls indicate that the country cannot get enough of them.

An experiment in which 978 Britons and 689 Americans were presented with a variety of ideas for “nudges”, or small changes in behaviour that can have large effects, hints that we may sometimes be too impressed by people with PhDs and professorships.

“I don't see any concrete signs of the crisis in trust that some scientists are worried about,” Magda Osman, a

reader in experimental psychology at Queen Mary, University of London, said. “In fact, there is a perverse finding in our study which suggests that even when they make fictitious claims, there is more trust in scientists compared to a government working group making genuine scientific claims.”

Dr Osman and her colleagues asked their participants to rate how plausible and ethical five different nudges were. Two of these nudges were genuine. The NHS, for example, really is putting posters at the bottom of stairwells to encourage people to use the stairs.

The other three — the coffee-stirring, the hairdryer-rationing and the crackdown on right-hand turns — had been made up out of thin air.

The researchers wanted to find out how the public went about judging these ideas, and whether it mattered who was proposing them. Overall, the Americans were a little more credulous than the British, and social scientists were more trusted than working groups of officials and lobbyists.

“It makes perfect sense,” Dr Osman said. “Credibility is a useful signal to assess the veracity of the claims that are being made. That doesn't mean to say it can't be gamed, but it is often a reliable cue.”

The results — if readers are still inclined to trust them — can be found in the journal *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*.

