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**When I say...fairness in selection**

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Review

## When I say...fairness in selection

Is a fair society one where everybody of the same ability has the same probability of success? Or where those of equal potential have equivalent opportunities? Or where those who have most to contribute to society have the best chance of making this a reality?

Over the years there has been an impressive drive to improve the perceived fairness of medical selection at all career stages. Yet, even with legal, societal, ethical and financial imperatives for doing so, evidence suggests this drive has had a mixed impact, at best. We wonder if one reason for this is that 'equality' itself is a highly contested concept. What do we mean by equality? Which of the opening suggestions, if any, are most fitting? Do you (the reader) have another view of equality? Indeed, should the term 'fairness', when used in conjunction with student selection, be placed in [air] quotes to highlight its subjectivity? <sup>1</sup> More broadly, '*people who praise [equality] or disparage it disagree about what they are praising or disparaging*'.<sup>2</sup>

Over the centuries various philosophical traditions have informed our thinking about equality. Reflecting our opening quandary, we briefly discuss three of these. Two are well-established ways of thinking, reflected in the many papers on selection and widening access to medicine. The third is the way that we believe the term "equality" should be used.

In libertarianism the concept of proportional equality suggests that those in society of equal ability should have the same probability of success. However, libertarianism itself can clothe itself in both the politics of the left and right. How one achieves the ability that one's potential dictates is often shaped by the society that one is born into. Left-leaning Libertarians would promote access to high-quality state funded, non-selective, education in order to achieve this. Those on the right tend to reserve the best educational opportunities for those with the resources to pay for them, although philanthropy is also encouraged, where those who have grown wealthy through capitalism may choose to support less advantaged members of society ('the deserving poor'). To some extent this thinking is echoed in the creation of 'widening access' or "pipeline" courses and schemes intended to increase access to medicine to the brightest students from disadvantaged or 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

The position of 'moral equality' asserts that everyone of equal potential has the same probability of success in society. This idea comes from the concept of 'human equality', which became increasingly widespread within political thinking from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is most famously enshrined in the United States Declaration of Independence which asserts that '*all men are created equal*' and '*endowed... with certain inalienable rights*'. The 'veil of ignorance' is a well-known method for determining the ethics of policies from a moral equality perspective. This is a thought experiment whereby one is invited to imagine being born into a society without knowing one's circumstances, *a priori*.<sup>3</sup> In essence, it is a way of attempting to purge personal interests and prejudices from the policy creation process. That is, it encourages policy makers to think more broadly about the potential impact of a policy on all members of a society. Where marked demographic differences occur on key variables it raises questions about whether selection is indeed equitable from a moral equality perspective. For example, in the UK it is well known that 80% of the enrolled medical students are supplied by 20% of the country's schools.<sup>4</sup> This implies that medical selection in the UK may not withstand the "veil of ignorance" test- that is, merely the fact of being educated in a certain high school is likely to greatly enhance or diminish an individual's opportunity to access medical education. In practice, moral equality can be frequently

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3 challenged in cultures, such as the United States, where the 'first language' is that of  
4 individualism, and themes of interconnectedness, community and interdependence are  
5 relegated to a 'second language'.<sup>5</sup>

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7 More recently the 'capability approach' has been put forward by Sen.<sup>6</sup> Sen proposed five  
8 components in assessing capability, one of which is concern for the distribution of  
9 opportunities within society. Capabilities denote an individual's opportunity and ability to  
10 generate valuable outcomes, accounting for personal characteristics and external factors.  
11 The approach has informed the way that, internationally, we estimate the development of a  
12 country (e.g. the Human Development Index, which takes into account educational  
13 opportunities such as adult literacy and school enrolment). Within this framework an  
14 equitable society is one where people are free to realise their potential. Although the  
15 philosophy is focussed on the individual we propose it can be extended and combined with  
16 elements of utilitarianism to argue that those with the potential to most benefit society should  
17 be provided with the greatest opportunities.  
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20 Bringing this discussion back to the case of medical selection, who has the potential to most  
21 benefit society? Is it the applicant from a good school with high grades, or is it those  
22 applicants most likely to eventually work in medically underserved areas? To illustrate how  
23 these principles may be implemented consider an example. In Australia, remote, rural areas  
24 are medically underserved. Medical school applicants from rural backgrounds, on average,  
25 perform less well on selection measures. However, they are more likely than those from  
26 urban backgrounds to eventually work in remote areas, where there is a desperate need for  
27 doctors.<sup>7</sup> However, saying 'yes' to such a candidate is, in effect, saying 'no' to another  
28 applicant- possibly one who achieved higher scores on the selection metrics and could claim  
29 'unfair' treatment. This situation has been legally challenged in the US. The Courts  
30 subsequently ruled that such 'positive discrimination' was justified where it was  
31 proportionately implemented "...with the goal of achieving the educational benefits of a more  
32 diverse student body...".<sup>8</sup> In this case, 'educational benefits' could be assumed to also  
33 represent the more general rewards for society of a diverse student intake. This leads us to  
34 challenge the predominant discourse in medical selection,<sup>9</sup> often subtly (and not so subtly)  
35 echoed in the language used around selection. A linguistic analysis of interviews with UK-  
36 based Admissions Deans reported a recurrent emphasis of the 'otherness' of under-  
37 represented applicants.<sup>10</sup> For example, one lead for admissions was quoted as follows: "*it's*  
38 *more people with, who come from sort of, you know, socio uh, poorer, more deprived*  
39 *socioeconomic groups, in terms of their families, or their communities, or their own*  
40 *origin, and that and that somehow, success will be defined when you have greater numbers*  
41 *from those backgrounds.*". The phrases in bold highlight where language is used to group  
42 together and stress the 'otherness' of a set of individuals, defining their characteristics  
43 through generalizations about their 'different' social and economic backgrounds. More subtle  
44 examples of problematic language have been reported in separate qualitative research  
45 focussed on high school teachers. It was observed that teachers in UK state schools,  
46 unused to having students successfully apply to medicine and perceiving admissions as  
47 particularly long and difficult, may only weakly endorse a student's aspirations to apply to  
48 medical school, and thereby subtly discouraging them. For example, in this quote a teacher  
49 talks of her reaction when students reveal their aspiration for medicine: "*I don't think I've*  
50 *ever been in the situation where I've felt it was my job to say, well perhaps you won't, I just*  
51 *keep it all very factual: this is what you'll need to do this, this is they kind of skills they're*  
52 *looking for, and then they go away and make up their own minds*". Again, the words in bold  
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3 reveal the immediate assumption that a medical career is not likely for students from that  
4 school. Such 'factual' or 'realistic' responses were well intentioned - seeking to protect a  
5 student from disappointment - but nevertheless may work against the widening access  
6 agenda.<sup>11</sup>  
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8 Every culture and country will also have its own definitions of equality and history shaping  
9 the groups of particular interest, as well as underserved populations. However, the principles  
10 of a capability approach combined with utilitarianism would seem applicable across different  
11 contexts. This can be summarised as taking a 'reverse engineering' approach to selection-  
12 where the selection processes are designed to optimise a mixture of entrants most likely to  
13 meet the medical workforce needs of the host country. This is not straightforward and there  
14 will inevitably be questions about who funds any additional costs for such equitable selection  
15 policies.<sup>12</sup> However, without taking a more radical approach to equality in selection it is  
16 difficult to see how any significant progress in widening access or in meeting the needs of  
17 medically underserved populations will be made.  
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20 In conclusion, 'when we say fairness/equality' we mean the triple consideration of fair/equal  
21 to the individual applicant, to the varied patient groups to be served, and to the needs of the  
22 profession overall.  
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13 None declared  
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For Review