

"Newton prosecuted with relish the counterfeiters partly responsible for the disarray of the country's currency." Robert Iliffe, page 39

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NICE should value real experiences over hypothetical opinions

SIR — The UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and other agencies for assessing health technology around the world are facing up to the challenges of rationing in a systematic and transparent way. But consideration of two factors could improve their decision-making.

First, the quality-of-life evaluation mentioned in your News Feature (*Nature* **461**, 336–339; 2009) needs more thought. NICE would achieve more if it valued health interventions according to the real suffering of patients, rather than on the basis of the hypothetical preferences of the public. There is evidence showing that the public are often prepared to sacrifice more life years than patients might be.

Also, public and patient preferences can misrepresent the impact of a particular state of health on our experiences (P. Dolan and D. Kahneman *Econ. J.* **118**, 215–234; 2008). For example, we may imagine physical pain to be more severe than depression, but depression can make us feel worse and so we evaluate our lives less favourably.

Second, NICE should not raise the cost per quality-adjusted life year (QALY) threshold for some conditions, such as the end of life, until there is good evidence for doing so. The threshold varies across different conditions. From an implicit default position where all QALYs are treated equally, NICE can now give greater weight to QALYs at the later stages of a terminal disease. NICE justifies this position as being in



accordance with the views of the general public — yet the evidence in this regard is actually quite weak.

There is some support from NICE's Citizens' Council for spending more on end-of-life care, but this preference has not been elicited in the context of what people would give up for it. In a choice between prioritizing end of life and reducing inequalities in lifetime health, it is likely that the general public would choose the latter (see go.nature.com/QgnrFX).

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Eastern European science stuck in an outmoded system

SIR — The problem that Jan Konvalinka and colleagues identify in their Correspondence — that the Czech bibliometric system for assessing grant proposals encourages mediocre research (*Nature* **460**, 1079; 2009) — is widespread in eastern Europe. Some policy-makers are upholding the old systems for allocating funds in public universities and research institutes, rather than using them to promote the best science.

In Slovenia, a bibliometric system introduced a few years

ago provides the main criteria for awarding research grants by national government, often overriding peer-reviewed evaluation. It divides scientific journals into categories that disregard impact factors, on the grounds that journals vary in quality for different fields. Although there may be some justification for the thinking behind this, the system in practice favours researchers who publish in low-impact journals over those who are struggling to do internationally competitive science and to publish in the best journals.

For example, a Slovenian endocrinologist might choose to publish a basic animal study in a prestigious endocrinology journal or in a much lower-impact agricultural journal. If the latter journal is rated at a higher position among agricultural journals than the former is in the field of endocrinology, the researcher will receive more points for publishing in the low-impact agricultural journal.

Likewise, a review article in a journal with no impact factor (but included in SCI, the science citation index) could be worth as many as 20 Slovenian bibliometric points, whereas one paper that was recently published in *Nature* — the result of years of work — gained its authors just 18.75 points each.

With the exception of the former East Germany, many universities and science policies

in central and eastern European countries did not go through a transition period when the economy changed. Respected professors who grew up and were educated under a very different system are still the principal policy-makers and still represent the majority of grant holders, even though they have not necessarily proved themselves in internationally competitive science.

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Research into group differences isn't wrong, just pointless

SIR — Bruce Lahn and Lanny Ebenstein (*Nature* **461**, 726–728; 2009) state "Some scholars have even called for a halt to research into [genetically based group differences] because of potential misuse of information", referring to a Commentary of mine on race, gender and intelligence (*Nature* **457**, 786–788; 2009).

This is a misinterpretation of my argument. My view is as I wrote in that Commentary: "The problem is not that knowledge of such group intelligence differences [between black and white, men and women] is too dangerous, but rather that there is no valid knowledge to be found in this area at all."

Lahn and Ebenstein disagree with my contention, which is of course their privilege. But they are not correct to conclude that I believe research in this or any area should be censored.

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