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Just Health Care?

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Utilitarianism and Health Economics

Economists often put emphasis on the special relationship between utilitarianism and economics, especially health economics. Up to now, however, few attempts have been made to clarify this link systematically. Our task is to critically reconsider prevalent opinions on the relationship between health economics and utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory which assesses actions, institutions, and rules as good if and only if they contribute to the maximisation of social utility. The determination of social utility is derived from the utility of the individual members of a society. The utility of an individual can be measured by happiness, pleasure, fulfilment of preferences etc.. Health economics is a branch of economics dealing with the health care system. According to many health economists, health economics is utilitarianism applied to health care, the difference being that the unit to be maximised is not utility but health. But this seems a misunderstanding, as utilitarianism consists in maximising utility and not health. We will discuss several strategies of reconciling utilitarian and the economic views on health maximisation. Then we will turn to the three main types of studies used in health economics, cost-effectiveness-analysis, cost-benefit-analysis and cost-utility analysis in order to scrutinize if the practice of health economists is in tune with or even bound to utilitarianism.