

SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

A Simple Proposal for Health Care Rationing

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the ultimate authority on priority and rationing, the man who decides the order of marching when kings, dictators, and prime ministers meet at the summit; the man who gave out scarce supplies during the North Pole expedition; the man who assigned individuals to life boats in the *Titanic* disaster—in short, the final authority on one human's value over another's.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. Dr. Noitall, what project are you working on these days?

Noitall. I am in charge of devising a rationing plan for health care proposals in the U.S. Congress. The usual plans have pious platitudes such as "first come, first served," with little flexibility for individuality. I am planning a superior rationing system that not only controls costs but also will simultaneously rid the world of some extremely obnoxious characters. As Gilbert and Sullivan said, "I've got a little list and they'll none of them be missed."

Science. Could you give me some specific examples of those you would place at low priority in the rationing system?

Noitall. At the bottom are telemarketing salesmen who call me by my first name.

Science. And what other types of people would you select against?

Noitall. I would give little succor to the inventors of plastic containers for candies and peanuts that only someone with the strength of Hercules can open, or the makers of child-proof medicine bottles that adults can't open, or the inventors of voice mail. Voice mail has ended personal communication in our society. It requires at least 3.66 phone calls before contact with any live person can be achieved. The same people who gave us "voice mail" also created "call waiting," so that even when you finally make telephone contact, it is constantly interrupted. Coherent conversations are a thing of the past.

Science. Are all the obnoxious features identified with technology? Are you a Luddite?

Noitall. Not at all. I include individuals incapable of standing at the end of a queue. They always think they are somehow more important than anyone else and therefore entitled to cut into line at airports, to jump ahead of others at grocery check-outs, to pretend to ask a question to get to the front of movie or sports event queues.

Science. Are there any scientists who deserve a low priority rating?

Noitall. Of course. The scientists who have slides filled with data so they are too small to read beyond the first row. Those who fill slides with blotches and numbers but fail to provide clear abscissas and ordinates so anyone can make head or tail of the data. Those who assume the audience has read all of the previous papers that the speaker has read and therefore give no background of previous work or nomenclature. The list goes on and on.

Science. But does your prioritizing apply in other areas of society?

Noitall. Certainly. The person who invented "we pause for station identification" as a pretext to allow an interminable stream of commercials and referees who call phony penalties to make time for commercials at football games will be assigned to a special category.

Science. Do you mean you will withhold life-saving surgery from such individuals?

Noitall. For the mild cases. For the lowest priorities, we hope they develop highly painful kidney stones; and we'll delay the scheduling of their operations for years, reminding them of how much pain they have inflicted on innocent victims.

Science. How do you expect to install this system, Dr. Noitall?

Noitall. I'm surprised you asked. It is obvious that the ultimate decision-making on who gets what operation has to be lodged with individual members of Congress. That is the only possible way the system will get approved by the U.S. Congress.

Science. But members of Congress have enough to do already. Won't it be terrible for them to be organizing the system for medical treatment?

Noitall. You are even more naïve than I thought. Think of the obvious relationship of contributions to congressional campaigns and ordering of operations. Congresspeople will no longer have to kowtow to political action committees to raise money, and citizens will love a system in which a campaign contribution gives instant access to health care.

Science. Do you think the public will accept a system that seems so rational?

Noitall. Not at first. But they will begin to see that my rationing system will make the world more civilized and much less overpopulated. Euphoria will be unrestrained.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.