

Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs)

1 The idea

QALYs are a unit of comparison: will treatment (policy, technology, etc.) A produce more QALYs than treatment (etc.) B?

1. quality of life improvements
2. life saving

2 Quality vs. life itself

Problem: surveys used to establish quality rankings ask people to compare shorter, higher quality lives with longer, lower quality lives. But nothing follows about how much they think different peoples' lives should be compared.

Example: hip replacements (cheap, big quality gains) vs. dialysis (expensive, only years gained).

One answer: life saving first, all quality improvements come second.

Menzel's answer: looking forward, people would prefer insurance that covers quality gains even if that comes at the cost of covering some life saving.¹

3 Forecasting, again

Problem: healthy people rate life with a chronic health problem lower than people who have that problem do.² Does this mean that surveys that include their opinions are biased against the handicapped?

¹ Menzel doesn't endorse maximizing QALYs; consent does the work for him (see p. 89, e.g.). I think his point is that the use of the QALY surveys makes sense only within his consent-insurance framework.

² Joe told us to expect this result weeks ago.

1. Less life saving.
2. More quality of life improvements.
3. More of both? Rejecting the QALY framework (p. 91).

4 Lives vs. life years

Example: saving one life for seven years vs. saving six lives for one year each (assuming quality is equal).

Example: twenty more years of life for a fifteen year old vs. twenty more years for a fifty year old (assuming quality is equal).

We all want “the rest of our lives”, no matter how long it will be or how old we are (Harris, 1985).

Can prior consent help to specify the trade-offs?

5 Further reading

A little lingo first. The “double jeopardy argument” maintains that using QALYs to ration care would subject the handicapped to two disadvantages: their handicaps and the lower value of their lives in rationing decisions. The “fair innings argument” maintains that we should favor the young over the old because the old have already had their fair innings, that is, time to be alive.

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