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Measures of Benefit, Social Values and Claims:
“(How) Can the Current
Health Economic Evaluation Paradigms
Be Amended to Meet Fairness Objectives?”

It is often assumed that decision makers pursue the goal of fair allocation of health care resources besides or in addition to the goal of maximizing health (multiple goals assumption). The task of combining the goals is then usually assumed to involve a trade-off. I argue that these assumptions are implausible. Most importantly, they suppress the fact that adopting the goal of health maximization amounts already to adopting a principle of justice, viz, the principle of additive interpersonal aggregation of the units of value (“utilitarian” principle). This principle cannot be accepted alongside other principles of justice since it constitutes an alternative to them. If it is unacceptable, the goal of maximizing health loses its normative basis. This general point – the untenability of the multiple goals assumption – can be exemplified in commenting on the idea of equity weights for QALYs. Equity weights are multiplication factors that are attached to certain patient group’s QALYs in order to change the value (then often called “social” or “societal value”) with which they contribute to the overall value of an outcome of resource allocation. Over and above the value of health, equity weights are meant to capture the value of distributing health according to people’s “fairness preferences”. The mode of aggregation is, however, still that of interpersonal addition and the task of resource allocation is still conceived to be an exercise in value maximization. The contribution highlights the conceptual and theoretical crookedness of this approach. I argue that fairness cannot be conceptualized within a value maximizing approach. For many current health economic evaluation approaches, integrating fairness is thus beyond the paradigm. Alternatives can only be hinted at in this contribution. I believe that a shift from value talk to talk of rights (or claims) is necessary, and I outline some differences in the functioning of such an alternative conceptualization of the task of resource allocation.