

Ph 458 Evidence and Policy

WEEK 9: From Evidence to Decision

1. A different argument for the important of randomising stems from Doll and, especially, Peto. It starts from the alleged fact that most improvements in therapeutic efficacy are likely to be small (meaning that the numbers responding positively to the treatment are small). An important part of the argument is that despite the smallness of the effect such improved treatments are worthwhile and should be given to patients: if they concern widespread diseases then they may save many lives despite the smallness of the effect. My paper on this argument suggests that there is some wonky decision theory involved; Peto et al look only at the 'upside' and do not factor in the (inevitable) down side. This is one respect in which a 'narrow viewscreen' may adversely affect the path from evidence to decision.
2. A second respect concerns 'The Precautionary Principle' (or rather, as we will see, "The" Precautionary Principle'). The article by Sunstein tries to tease out different versions of this Principle of differing strengths, and argues that, while weaker versions are unexceptionable, versions of any strength would lead to 'paralysis' – all possible actions, including inaction, would be ruled out by the Principle. Sunstein then goes on to argue that the reason why, despite this, precautionary reasoning can seem plausible to some people is again because they are adopting (in a variety of ways) a 'narrow viewscreen' – they leave out of consideration factors that we have evidence will play a role in the outcome of the decision involved.

Reading and Study questions

Required Reading:

1. Articles by Yusuf et al and by Worrall (see Moodle)
2. C.R. Sunstein 'Beyond the Precautionary Principle' (ditto)

Further Reading:

For 2: chapter 7 of the book by Dick Taverne

Study Questions

For 1:

- a. What is the Peto et al argument for the additional virtue of randomization?
- b. Why does Worrall suggest in effect (without using the term) that the argument rests in part on adopting a 'narrow viewscreen'?

For 2:

- a. Distinguish versions of the Precautionary Principle (PP) of differing strengths?
- b. How does Sunstein argue that the strong version he focusses on would lead to 'paralysis'? (Use examples). Is he right?
- c. Are there versions of PP that seem closer to the original intuitive underlying idea?
- d. If so, are they defensible?
- e. Outline some of the factors that he sees as involved when people think they are applying the PP. Do they all ultimately fall under the category of adopting a too narrow viewscreen?