

President's Insights. January 2024

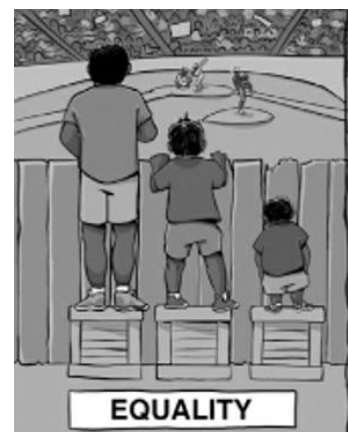
Equality, Equity, and Justice: What should we strive for?

As VOSHERs, we come in all kinds of flavors. Yet, we have one common mission. It is a belief that all people must have the *freedom to see*. This statement implies that sight is not a privilege of the few, but the right of everyone.

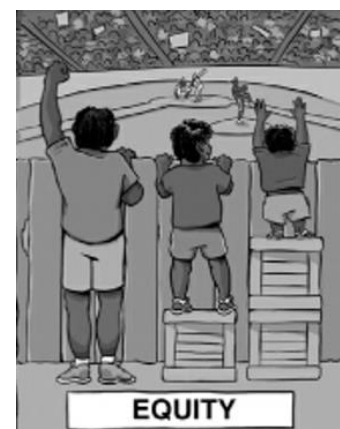
However, we know that there are significant health disparities among us. Take the Guna Indigenous population of Panama. We found that the prevalence of visual impairment was 41%, the highest among any indigenous group in Latin America. About 1,500 Gunas live in 125 houses in a community called Guna Nega. Their homes are located beside the garbage dump in Panama City. Pigs and other animals roam around the dump. Many of Guna's livelihoods depend on garbage recycling. The road to their community is mainly unpaved and access to the city is difficult.

How can we significantly improve the Guna's plight?

Equality: By providing equal health resources to all citizens, the government and NGOs can improve their health. Yet, because of the Gunas' poor health outcomes, providing the same health resources as everyone else will not be enough. They have a higher prevalence of myopia, astigmatism, cataracts, and pterygia. One in 150 have oculocutaneous albinism. Access to a clean, healthy environment is limited. Imagine the kids in this drawing. All three kids aspire to watch the baseball game. To achieve equality, every kid is given a box to stand. The box is insufficient for the kid on the right to enjoy the game. The Gunas are like the kid on the right. Given their poor health status, providing equal resources will not be enough.



Equity: Since the Gunas have poorer health (including visual impairment and blindness), we should provide more resources to them. In terms of eye care, they should be provided greater access to optometrists, eyeglasses, and medications. They should be referred more frequently to secondary services such as cataracts and pterygia surgeries. Doing this will result in an unequal distribution of resources to allow the Gunas to have better health outcomes. In our example of kids struggling to watch the baseball game, the kid on the right has two boxes to allow him to enjoy the game.



Justice: One main reason that the Gunas have poorer health outcomes is that they live in poverty. They live beside the city's garbage dump in unsanitary conditions. Their vision impairment reduces their capacity to work and produce. They lack proper transportation. Providing more health resources helps reduce health disparities. However, the root cause of their plight is their abject poverty. A focus on justice would imply improving their living conditions to create a clean environment and provide work opportunities and transportation so that they can become more productive. We should provide quality education so that children can learn and become fruitful citizens. In this approach, we are removing the structural barriers that impede people from growing and flourishing. Using our baseball game metaphor, we are removing the fence – the root barrier – so that every child, including the one on the right, can enjoy the game.



What this means

As VOSHERs, we strive to eliminate health disparities.

We believe in equity. We all work to provide additional eye care resources to those who need them the most. More than 150,000 people in need have benefited from our humanitarian clinics on an average year of humanitarian work before the pandemic.

However, we should not lose the perspective of justice. We should also strive to help the people in the communities we serve to flourish and become healthier, productive, and happier citizens.

How to better promote justice is a matter of deep thinking and discussion.

I will attempt to address this theme in a future note.

In the meantime, let me summarize my musings with this quote:

"Equality, therefore, treats everyone the same, equity treats individuals in a way necessary to achieve equal outcomes, and justice removes the fundamental barriers in place that led to the disparity in the first place." (1)

Regards,

Hector Santiago

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1. Smalley, KB, Warren, JC, Fernandez, MI,. Health Equity: A Solutions-Focused Approach. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company; 2021.

Acknowledgment: The drawings were originally from the Center for Story-Based Strategies. Website: [the4thBox](https://www.the4thbox.org) — Center for Story-based Strategy ([storybasedstrategy.org](https://www.storybasedstrategy.org))