

QALY (Quality-adjusted Life Years) Module for STEM Faculty Integrating Bioethics Content into Their Courses

This is a guide for STEM faculty who would like to incorporate content about the fair distribution of healthcare resources into one of their courses. Faculty can pick and choose from the materials below, to suit their own educational context. Teaching and discussing all of the readings will likely take three 90-minute class sessions.

Readings

1. **Day one:** Mill, John Stuart, "Chapter 2: What Utilitarianism Is," *Utilitarianism*, edited by Jonathan Bennett (2017), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/mill1863.pdf>.

This online edition of Mill's text has been edited for undergraduates by Jonathan Bennett. You can ask students to read a short excerpt, which introduces Mill's theory (pages 4-8) or a longer excerpt, which both introduces Mill's theory and considers objections and replies (pages 4-18).

Helpful Supplements

Wireless Philosophy video "Ethics: Utilitarianism, Part 1: What is Utilitarianism?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvnz5E75ZIA> (4:31 minutes)

Wireless Philosophy video "Ethics: Utilitarianism, Part 2: Problems for Utilitarianism" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGDk23Q0S9E> (6:22 minutes)

2. **Day two:** Williams, Alan, "The Value of QALYs," *Health and Social Services Journal*, 1985.

This paper introduces QALYs (quality-adjusted life years), a utilitarian mechanism for distributing scarce healthcare resources.

3. **Day two:** Harris, John, "QALYfying the Value of Life," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 13, no. 3 (September 1987), pp. 117-23. <https://jme.bmj.com/content/medethics/13/3/117.full.pdf>.

This paper objects that the QALY view discriminates against older people and people with disabilities.

4. **Day three:** Hill, Chris, "The Note," in *Willing to Listen, Wanting to Die*, edited by Helga Kuhse, (Penguin Books: Ringwood, Victoria, 1994), pp. 9-17.

An affecting open letter about one person's decision to end his life, given the quality of his life.

5. **Day three:** "Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien," directed by Jessica Yu (1996).

An Oscar-winning documentary about a journalist and poet living with an iron lung. Here are some reviews:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breathing_Lessons:_The_Life_and_Work_of_Mark_O%27Brien

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115753/>

<https://variety.com/1997/tv/reviews/breathing-lessons-the-life-and-work-of-mark-o-brien-1117341375/>

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a case in which quantity of life would be more valuable than quality of life?
2. Is life valuable in itself, regardless of its quality? If so, what is the ground of this value? From where does that intrinsic value derive? If not, what consequences might follow from that lack of intrinsic value?
3. QALYs distribute scarce healthcare resources on the basis of the positive and negative consequences of that distribution. What else might we consider, other than the consequences of the distribution, when we're trying to determine how to distribute a scarce resource?
4. Imagine you are a policy maker. What kinds of healthcare policies would maximize QALYs?
5. Can you think of a case in which the distribution of a scarce healthcare resource according to QALYs would not be fair?
6. Should a society save as many lives as possible? Or, should a society save as many lives as it can cheaply or economically save?

Assessments

1. **In-class activity:** "Teaching Quality-adjusted Life Years (QALYs)," an assignment by Dr. Bonny Parkinson, Senior Research Fellow, Macquarie University Centre for the Health Economy (MUCHE), Australia.
https://www.mq.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/787079/QALYs-exercise-instructions.pdf
2. **High-impact learning:** Ask students to interview someone more than 75 years of age about the best year of their life. Here are some possible interview questions:

- What was the best year of your life and why?
 - If you had a time machine, would you return to that year? Why or why not?
 - If you could remain at that age forever and relive that year again and again, would you choose to do so? Why or why not?
 - When you were younger, did you think your quality of life would improve or decline in old age? Why?
 - Throughout the last 10 years, has your quality of life improved or declined? How so?
 - What do you think an outsider, i.e. anyone who is not you, would say about your quality of your life? Would they have a different perspective from you on the quality of your life?
3. **Paper assignment:** Critically assess *one* of Harris's objections to the QALY view. In a 4-6-page paper, begin by summarizing Harris's argument for the objection under consideration. Your summary should be a scholarly one that uses for support relevant quotations from the text. Next, present a back-and-forth conversation that starts with an objection to Harris's objection. Why do you think Harris's initial objection is unreasonable? Now, how would Harris defend himself against your response to his objection? And, finally, how would you respond to that defense?

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