Resource allocation

The great debate in the United Kingdom about the allocation of resources in the National Health Service was started by the publication of the consultative document on priorities (Department of Health and Social Security, 1976) which provoked an immediate response from those who were to receive a reduced allocation and the debate continued with The Way Forward, which, unfortunately, seemed to be written by a completely different group of civil servants with different objectives from those who started the debate a year previously (Department of Health and Social Security, 1977).

In this issue of the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health several authors have joined together to consider some of the basic principles that have to be considered in developing a health service. Knox shows clearly that 'equity', 'need', and 'demand' are essentially conflicting principles and that it is impossible to achieve an objective best solution unless a specific set of principles is defined. Acheson extends this problem to show that the decision process requires moral and ethical judgements in which politicians, the profession, and the public, need help and education to define the reality of the underlying issues. Brennan and Lancashire play a different tune, like a symphony returning to its opening bars. In the first volume of the British Journal of Social Medicine was a paper by Woolf (1947) which showed that in 1939 the major determinants of infant mortality were overcrowding, density of housing, and poverty; in 1971 the same pattern of association existed. The health of a community is but little influenced by the allocation of medical resources.

References

