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The Prisoner's Dilemma and Medical Economics

Last month I described the "Prisoner's Dilemma," a hypothetical situation in which two prisoners, separated and interrogated individually, must each decide whether to respond to their own short-term needs by betraying the other, or to adhere to principle and protect each other. Their independent decisions, not to betray each other, serve not only the interests of the other prisoner, but each prisoner's own interests as well.

The outcome of computer analyses of this game played repeatedly with a variety of choice sequences becomes a model for the overall societal result of individual actions. The conclusion drawn from these analyses is always the same: the overall success of a group is enhanced in proportion to its members' loyalty to one another. There is a certain irony in this observation since bees and ants instinctively behave in this manner, whereas humans, even those that are well-read and highly educated, regularly choose narrow self-interest.

A sense of group identity, a common mission, enhances the likelihood of beneficial decision making, but this does not always occur. When individual scientists do not see themselves as members of a larger community, what happens when research budgets are tightened? During the current reforms in medical care funding, will medical delivery systems act to protect the important element of quality of care, or will some medical organizations sacrifice certain procedures or other medical specialties, or sacrifice care by specialists in general, to cull favor with a higher authority? Will individual elements of the medical care delivery system sacrifice excellence in medical care in favor of their own short-term benefits?

As we confront many choices in both our personal and professional lives, we would do well to remember that long-term interests are best served by not sacrificing principle and to hope that our colleagues also remember this lesson.

Stanley J. Goldsmith, MD, Editor-in-Chief
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