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Does Science Policy Matter?

In “Does Science Policy Matter?” Sarewitz identifies the misdirection of our perspective on both science’s health and its capacity to have a positive impact on society. We have mistakenly evaluated health based on the money flowing into science; more budget = better science. However, as Sarewitz points out, this is a faulty equation; perhaps akin to measuring the health of a river based solely on the amount of water flowing through.

To illustrate this, Sarewitz describes the “Byzantine” structures by which budgets are set. He does offer a possible relationship between budget and health - *if* policy makers were allocating budget strategically, and *if* that strategy reflected societal investment in society, then perhaps allocations might be a reflection of at least society’s interest in science. However because of the “labyrinthine” nature of governmental budget meetings, Sarewetiz concludes that there is no strategy across departments and thus no way for departmental budget choices to reflect .

An over emphasis on cost can reduce the effectiveness of each dollar. Like the flawed equation above, more is not better. According to Sarewitz, we have lost sight of the *why* of doing science, and have neglected to examine the society that we’re presumably trying to better through our science. A focus on more or less makes us unable to focus on better or worse (p.37).

Sarewitz also points out that policy models and policy choices don’t make a direct difference on socioeconomic outcomes (p.37) - different approaches have roughly the same outcome. If we are attempting to achieve a certain societal goal, it would make sense to consult the society we are attempting to benefit. In the absence of this public forum (or other engagement mechanism), it seems as though policy and budget decisions are made in a vacuum (and not strategically) and that, ultimately, policy does not matter.

In his conclusion, Sarewitz offers questions that we can use to transform the way that we make science policy. However, he does not *directly* answer the question of whether or not science matters. He also doesn’t answer the challenge he set up in the introduction to his article - how do we measure the health of science overall?