



Letter to the Editor

THE AUTHOR REPLIES

I thank Dr. Williams for his thoughtful comments (1) on my book review (2). His view may very well be the dominant one in the health services research community. His point is that what I characterized as a “we don’t get no respect” tone by Dr. Wennberg was an appropriate response to the concerted opposition to his ideas. I disagree.

All of us develop personal narratives, in which we make sense of what we do and what happens to us in life. The tone of that narrative is the product of thousands of choices of how to interpret the everyday events that we experience. To give a trivial example, if a manuscript is rejected with unfavorable reviews, the spectrum of interpretation stretches from “my ideas are worthless” to “my enemies are conspiring against me.” Between those 2 pathologic poles lies a spectrum of interpretations that are within the normal range but perhaps closer to one pole or the other. We make voluntary choices about where along that spectrum the components of our personal narrative will be, although we tend to see our interpretations as totally determined by the circumstances.

In my opinion, the narrative that emphasizes resistance and struggle tends to discourage useful dialogue. Within that narrative, people who disagree with us do so for suspect motives; their ideas are not to be taken seriously. Such an attitude tends to stifle the evolution of ideas and to contribute to dogma. Most of us can see this occurring among individuals on the other side of whatever political positions we hold. It is considerably more difficult for us to see it occurring among people on our side.

I, too, read the article by Wennberg and Gittelsohn (3) in *Science* and have been an enthusiastic admirer ever since.

Wennberg’s insights have been brilliant, but I am not surprised that such radically new ideas—supply driving demand, for example—took almost 2 decades to gain traction. Imagine the chaos if we were always trying to recreate critically important societal institutions based on this year’s ideas. I do not see a “we don’t get no respect attitude” as inevitable or all that helpful in encouraging open discussion of Wennberg’s important observations.

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