Early intervention: Is it worth it?

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- Sorry, just 1 economist who wasn’t “leading enough” to get asked to sign any of those letters ...

Coverage
- What do we mean by “Is it worth it?”
- Seven deadly economic sins
- Take-home messages

Not covered:
- Review of all the economics evidence

What do we mean by “Is it worth it?”

The underlying problem

Scarcity
There are not enough resources to meet all of society’s needs or wants
→ So society has to choose how to use them (i.e. how to ration or to allocate or perhaps to cut)

If the core ‘professional’ question is:
→ Does this treatment work?
Then the core economic question is:
→ Is it worth it?
I.e., do the outcomes justify the costs?
Seven deadly economic sins
- Ignorance
- Neglect
- Selfishness
- Myopia
- Impatience
- Inequity
- Misplaced frugality

What does your intervention cost?
- What is the annual budget? How much of it have you spent this year? Are you on track to balance the books?
  That is accountancy; and is essential.
  But economics would go further:
  - What is the cost per child/family supported?
    How does that cost vary for children with different needs?
  - What is the cost per child going to be next year?
  - What is the cost of that new development you are thinking of introducing?
  - And is it worth it?

The most important input is often the one that you usually neglect

Costs of children with persistent antisocial behaviour, London

The most important input is often the one that you usually neglect

Often the largest cost ‘burden’ falls to the family:
- Out-of-pocket payments for services/interventions
- Travel costs to take the child to ‘treatments’
- Lost employment
- Lost leisure time
- Health costs for family members
- The ‘costs’ of strain

Selfishness

Think about the wider context, not just your own budget and targets

Many children and adolescents – and their families – have multiple needs ...
And so will need support from multiple services, each with their own budget:
- School
- Other education
- Health
- Social care
- Youth justice
- Housing
- Social security, etc

Children with complex mental health problems – service costs

Total cost for just these services averaged £52,884 per child per year, at 2000/01 prices
Clark et al., Child & Adolescent Mental Health, 2005

Looking after only your own budget, pursuing only your own targets ...
... could well lead to worse outcomes for children, adolescents and families ... and worse use of scarce resources.

Myopia
Often those multiple needs have an impact over a very long time

**Example: Inner London Longitudinal Study**
18-year follow up of children studied by Michael Rutter and team in part of South London in 1970
- Teacher ratings, child questionnaires at age 10
- Follow-up at age 26-28 of 50% of those with psychological problems and random 8% of the others
- Calculation of costs of services used between ages 10 and 28

**Costs in early adulthood from childhood conduct disorder**

![Costs (£) from ages 10 to 28](chart)

**Don’t judge an intervention only by its short-term effects and costs**

Examples from my groups:
- Early intervention for psychosis (3 yrs)
- Early detection of psychosis (2 yrs)
- Anti-stigma campaign (1 yr)
- Social engagement, older people (1 yr)
- Falls prevention (3 yrs)
- Health screening for adults with learning disabilities (1yr)
- Health visitors, PND (30 yrs)

Plus currently looking at pre-school and school-based interventions (finish Apr/May)

**Impatience**

Know the **time profiles** of prevention, treatment, etc – in many cases these will be **life-long**.
Gather evidence to persuade decision-makers to **invest long**.
**Prevention** and **early intervention** have never been so important.

**Inequity**

Every child is different ...

... and so we would expect their **costs and outcomes** to be different.
Moreover, different families have different **strengths, resources etc** – and publicly supported services are supposed to address such variations.
As budgets get tighter and jobs get fewer, is there a risk that the most disadvantaged lose out?
At a time when **efficiency** is uppermost in the minds of decision-makers, **equity** needs to be a priority objective.
**Misplaced frugality**

Why do we deliver ‘interventions’?
- because there are **needs** that should be met; and
- because this will improve quality of life and other **outcomes**

So if we **cut spending** we will not be able to meet as many needs, or achieve such good outcomes.
Sure, we need to be frugal (economical) in the use of resources, but in an **informed** way.
Decision-makers need to ask **“Is it worth it?”**, not **“How quickly can we cut it?”**

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**Take-home messages**

*Ignorance* → Know your costs  
*Neglect* → Families are precious resources and incur costs too  
*Selfishness* → Don’t fixate on your own targets to the detriment of outcomes and wider efficiencies  
*Myopia* → Make sure you take the long view  
*Impatience* → And try to persuade decision-makers to **invest** long  
*Inequity* → Efficiency may be a priority, but this is exactly the time to emphasise equity  
*Misplaced frugality* → Ask **“Is it worth it?”**, not **“How quickly can we cut it?”**