economic resources may achieve greater social justi-
ce, but it probably does not always achieve a reduction
in health inequalities, despite the improved socioeco-
nomic and health status of those who are in a more di-
sadvantaged situation.

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Comment. Redistribution of socioeconomic
resources without a reduction of health
inequalities? Some surprises on the road
to Utopia

(Comentario. ¿Redistribución de los recursos
socioeconómicos sin reducción de las desigualdades
en salud? Algunas sorpresas en el viaje a Utopia)

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Socioeconomic inequalities in health have been found in
all countries with available data1, and logically find their ori-
gins in the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources,
such as education, occupation and income. If a totally egal-
tarian society would be feasible, in which everybody would
have the same level of income, there would of course be no health
inequalities by income level. Similarly, if everybody would have
the same level of education, there would be no health ine-
qualities by level of education.

While this is logically incontrovertible, the actual road to
Utopia is paved with surprises. Smaller inequalities in socio-
economic resources are not always accompanied by smaller
health inequalities. In England and Wales between 1920 and
1970, decreasing income inequalities between occupational
classes were accompanied by larger mortality inequalities2.

In Western Europe, societies with smaller income inequalities,
like the Nordic countries, do not have smaller health inequa-
ties than societies with larger income inequalities, such as
Spain and Italy3.

At first sight, Regidor et al’s paper4 seems to be another
addition to this paradoxical literature. The authors succinctly
phrase their provocative, but potentially important, conclusion
as follows: «The redistribution of socioeconomic resources
achieves greater social justice, but probably does not lead to
reduced health inequalities in all cases».

This conclusion is based on an analysis in which they lo-
oked at inequalities in self-perceived health in Spain at two
points in time, 1987 and 2001. They measured health ine-
qualities by calculating relative and absolute differences in self-
perceived health by level of education, and by level of inco-
me (estimated on the basis of the average per capita income
of the province of residence).

Despite the short time-period, there apparently has been
an enormous upward shift in the distribution of education in the
Spanish population, and a notable reduction in the inequality
of per capita provincial income. While the latter has been ac-
companied by a reduction in inequalities in self-perceived he-
alth between higher and lower incomes (only after controlling
for education, and not statistically significantly so, table 2), there
was no such reduction in inequalities of self-perceived health
by level of education. On the contrary, health inequalities by
level of education clearly increased over time (table 1).

Do these findings indeed support the authors’ conclusion?
Actually, the situation is not as dramatic as they suggest. He-
alth inequalities by level of (provincial) income have decreased as one would expect, although not statistically significantly so. The main «problem» is the increase of health inequalities by level of education. While it is true that relative and absolute differences in self-perceived health between those with a higher and a lower level of education have increased, it is also true that because of the «redistribution of socioeconomic resources» the number of people with a lower level of education has greatly diminished. The authors have not calculated a measure of health inequalities which takes this into account, such as the Relative Index of Inequality or the Population-Attributable Fraction⁵. If they had, the results would certainly not have shown such a strong increase in health inequalities by level of education.

Equally importantly, while income can be thought of as a socioeconomic resource which can be «redistributed», in the sense that as a result of this redistribution some people «receive» more than they did before, education cannot. More than income, education is something one «achieves», not only «receives». As the authors themselves note, those who had a low level of education in 2001 may be another section of the population than those who had a low level of education in 1987. It is quite likely that they are relatively more disadvantaged, not only cognitively but in many other respects as well. It is therefore not surprising that health inequalities between the higher and lower educational groups have increased, as has been noted in other European countries as well⁶. Shouldn't we actually expect that, using the measures Regidor et al used, health inequalities between educational groups are largest in the year before we realize our Utopia of equal educational achievement for everybody?

These data show that although the road to Utopia is paved with surprises, we should not let ourselves be distracted by thinking that «redistribution of socioeconomic resources (...) does not (...) lead to reduced health inequalities». To the extent that socioeconomic resources are really redistributed, the opposite will ultimately be the case.

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