Letters

improving their EQ abilities through training would be a better criterion for admissions committees. In addition, EQ training should be incorporated into the medical school curriculum. If this change is widely adopted, improvement in EQ scores could be assessed and included as a determinant of a student’s preparedness to enter residency training and professional practice as a physician.

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To the Editor What separates the best physicians from their peers? A recent Viewpoint argued that EQ may be more important than the surrogates of IQ traditionally used for physician selection.1 Although few would argue that kindness, empathy, and emotional sensitivity are unimportant qualities, the question of whether Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores (or any other blunt tool that correlates with IQ) can reliably predict the best physicians is an empirical one.

The evidence is clear: IQ matters, and it matters a lot. The authors acknowledged that an individual must be smart to attend medical school.1 However, what happens after acceptance to medical school, when everyone else is smart? Does a physician with “average” intelligence in this unique environment perform any better than one with above-average intelligence? Decades of research have shown that cognitive ability robustly predicts job performance, with a mean meta-analytic correlation of 0.65 reported in 2008.2 Yet its predictive power increases as a function of job complexity, with professional and managerial jobs correlating with IQ at upward of 0.58 and low-skilled jobs at only 0.23.3 Few jobs appear to tax reasoning abilities and problem-solving skills (i.e., what intelligence tests measure) more than being a physician.

EQ, by comparison, has simply not been empirically demonstrated to be a useful predictor of job performance.4 When used in combination with a measure of cognitive ability, it does not capture any meaningful variance in performance beyond what is already captured by IQ. Studies of incremental validity in personnel selection criteria have seldom found any constructs that do. Among the few constructs are measures of conscientiousness and integrity, but large meta-analyses have found performance-based measures of EQ to add only around 1%.5

We are not suggesting that emotional acumen is irrelevant, but we do caution against downplaying the insights produced by a century of intelligence research. Individuals want to build trust and affinity with physicians responsible for their health, and future research in psychology should explore how best to do that. In a vacuum of knowledge, however, it would seem that the best investment in health will likely come from finding the most intelligent physician.

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In Reply In the 21st century, medicine will focus on changing the behaviors of chronically ill patients and working effectively in clinical teams. The attributes necessary to succeed are not technical skills but compassion and empathy. Yet medicine continues to emphasize IQ and minimize EQ.

One clear way to correct this is to increase the value of EQ in medical school admissions. We agree with Ms Kantor and Dr Kantor’s claim that “embracing diversity in the medical student body, including diversity of EQ and IQ levels...may be of substantial value.”

We also agree with Ms Shore and colleagues that EQ and IQ must go hand in hand. However, we disagree that, because EQ can be improved through training, admissions committees should only consider whether students are “responsive to improving their EQ abilities.” A good portion of a person’s EQ is relatively stable, influenced by genetics and early childhood experiences.1,2 It cannot be expected that training alone will provide a future physician with the necessary EQ skills to succeed.