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In committee

Americans love committees more than any other people in the world. As an instrument of participatory democracy with opportunities for debate, discussion, dissension, and compromise, committees pervade all aspects of American life, from 5 year olds assigned to committees in kindergarten to the two houses of Congress passing widely disparate bills and then meeting in a joint conference committee to iron out differences.

Committees enable executives to receive input, obstruct, procrastinate, or fill in a boring day with nothing else to do. For some doctors committees provide relief from seeing an interminable succession of patients in the clinic. Hospitals have medical committees on quality, drug use, drug formulary, blood banking, intensive care, or tracheostomies, all reporting to the executive medical staff committee. Social clubs have committees for art, literature, sports, finance, and housekeeping. High-rise condominium buildings have committees for beautification, canopy and building façade, finance, employee protocol, infrastructure, and security.

You can often tell people's real personalities from how they behave in committees—that is, if you cannot watch them play football. Some people are effective in committee, others less so. A *BMJ* obituary once said about the deceased that "in committee he was not too effective."

In universities the promotion committee is all-important for achieving rank and tenure. It has strict criteria for promotion at every level, to be deviated from only for political reasons. Some universities have separate tracks for professors of medicine (great research), professors of clinical medicine (not quite so great), and clinical professors (merely come to teach). Committees pay lip service to clinical excellence and teaching but really care only about publications and grants. The documentation required at higher ranks can be enormous. Applications weighing less than 100 g are unlikely to succeed.

Most candidates for promotion will have published on different subjects, but this is not always so. I remember one candidate, an infectious disease specialist, who had written much, but only about one fungal disease. Whereupon an aging professor who had slumbered through most of the discussion suddenly came to life and interjected, "But does he know how to treat the clap?"