Poetry and Cartoons in Medical School Selection Tests. Some Examples from the Graduate Medical School Admissions Test (GAMSAT)

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One of the difficulties with examining high-stakes selection tests such as GAMSAT is that they are highly secure. Therefore tests of this nature are, by necessity, usually treated as “black boxes” within academic research regarding their use in selection. This paper, written from the point of view of the research fellow at ACER (the Australian Council for Educational Research) leading the writing and construction of the humanities and social sciences section of GAMSAT, allows a look inside the black box. Specifically, it considers a cartoon item that was used in GAMSAT alongside its psychometric item analysis (N=2692) as well as three poetry items and their psychometric data (N=9307). Although poetry and cartoons form a rather small portion of the stimulus used within medical selection tests worldwide they are heavily over-represented in criticisms of it; criticisms which are typically impossible to respond to as the security of the tests renders examples unavailable. By showing precisely how objects of this nature are used within medical selection and clearly connecting the items with the qualities we are looking for in medical candidates it is hoped that the question of why they are used can be answered. The paper concludes by briefly discussing some of the problems that arise from exclusively treating selection instruments as black boxes and argues that in order for investigations into the validity of selection instruments to be themselves valid, they must include examples and analysis of how the assessment of variables is operationalised within a given test.