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RAISE Act or Reduce Act?

None of us is immune to the impact of federal policy changes, either personally or professionally, consciously or subconsciously. August 2, 2017, began like any other day until I learned about the proposed RAISE Act,¹ a bill that, if passed, would change the US immigration process from its current state to a merit-based system. In the new proposal, points are awarded for age, education, extraordinary achievement, English language proficiency, entrepreneurial initiatives, and having a high-paying job offer. A maximum of 90 points can be awarded, linking points and merit to legal immigration to the United States.

I suspect that many immigrants have mentally calculated how they would have fared in this proposed system. Despite being in this country for more than 25 years and calling it my home, I wondered whether I would have had the chance to be here had the RAISE Act been law back in 1992. Adding up my worth based on 6 criteria points was sobering.

I started with the less daunting categories, assessing age first. I scored 8 points based on my age of 23 years at the time; the new bill awards the most points to immigrants between the ages of 26 and 30 years. Next, I answered the education question. I had graduated medical school in Syria and thus could get 10 points as a foreign medical graduate. I was getting excited with my point accumulation until I hit the third category: record of extraordinary achievement. My brain raced to find something extraordinary I had accomplished, and contrary to what my parents believed, none of my prior accomplishments would have even remotely qualified. The new proposed rules consider extraordinary achievements in 2 well-defined categories. The first is winning a Nobel prize or comparable recognition in a science or social science field; the second, winning an Olympic medal within the past 8 years or placing first in another comparable international athletic event in which the majority of the best athletes in an Olympic sport were represented, as determined by the Commissioner of US Citizenship and Immigration Services. Although I enjoyed watching the Olympics and once placed third in a hard-nosed class chess competition, I was not even close to receiving any points in this category. The next category is English-language ability. My English skills were so-so at the time and I was not in the top half of those taking an officially sanctioned English proficiency examination such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), which is what is required in the RAISE Act. My heart continued to sink as I went on to the next criterion. Applicants are asked their plan for investing money in the United States, with points awarded to those investing at a starting baseline of \$1.35 million; if minus points could be awarded for this last category, that would have been my score. Last, applicants are graded based on their job offer and associated salary, with zero points

given when an applicant has no job or a salary less than 150% of the median household income in the state in which the applicant would be employed. I certainly had no high-paying job offers as a prospective intern. It is a bitter shade of irony that the very reason immigrants come seeking opportunity in the United States is to accomplish the ideals that make up the RAISE act. I had come here to study English, pass the United States Medical Licensure Examination, apply for a medical residency, complete my training, obtain an excellent job offer, then do something extraordinary with my life. I saw the United States as seen by others: the land of opportunity and potential.

The new law states that a minimum of 30 points are required to join the eligible applicant pool. I would have scored 28 and thus would have been deemed ineligible for consideration for immigration to this country. I do not know where I would be today had I not entered the United States. I do know that I am now a hematologist and medical oncologist with more than 17 years of clinical and research experience. I have provided care to thousands of patients, and I have contributed hundreds of peer-reviewed articles to the medical literature. I have a vested interest in cost of cancer care and have pursued business school to better understand health economic constructs and solutions that help patients on a larger scale. If I was fortunate enough to save 1 patient's life, then this journey, despite its ups and downs, has been well worth the effort.

I am only one of many immigrants who work hard to help patients in need and to ease suffering. The number of foreign medical graduates who participated in the National Resident Matching Program in 2016 was 12 790 physicians, of whom 6638 (52%) were granted a first-year residency spot. This represented 24% of the total first-year positions that were available across the United States. Of these, 3769 physicians were not US citizens and were either employed on a work permit visa or planning permanent immigrant status.² These numbers are not trivial, especially considering the shortage of physicians across this nation, mainly affecting rural and underserved areas. In fact, according to the Immigrant Doctors Project,³ there are more than 7000 practicing physicians in the United States who were born in 1 of the 6 countries slated in the travel ban proposed by the Trump administration. Furthermore, 94% of Americans live in a community with at least 1 physician from an affected country.³ Physicians from the 6 affected countries provide 2.3 million appointments each year in areas of physician shortage.³ If these are the statistics for physicians as they relate to only 6 countries, what are the repercussions on patients and the medical community when immigration laws and restrictions are expanded substantially?

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While this is only my story, I am certain that there are many comparable stories, not only in medicine but in numerous other fields where immigrants have had an impact on society at large. I plead with politicians and policy makers to think through some of these proposals, bills, and acts. What and whom do they serve? Why are they being brought up? Are we depriving this country of diversity and equal opportunity, reducing core traits on which it was built?

Merriam-Webster⁴ defines the transitive verb *raise* as to "heighten," to "invigorate," or to "elevate," among other descriptions. Immigrants in the United States embrace opportunity and are motivated by the potential to raise standards, heighten discovery, and invigorate the economy. History has shown us as much. Based on criteria that do not consider the potential of immigrants, perhaps this bill should be more aptly called the "Reduce" Act because its impact will be a reduction in embracing those who have the talent to bring value to the United States.

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