

## Comment on the Proposal to Rename the R.A. Fisher Lecture

The Fisher Lecture is an annual prize of the Committee of Presidents of Statistical Societies (COPSS) “to honor both the contributions of Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher and the work of a present-day statistician for their advancement of statistical theory and applications.” To many statisticians, it is fitting that such a distinguished honor bears the name of Fisher, who introduced the concepts of likelihood and sufficiency, pioneered the design of experiments, and developed widely used methods and techniques such as the analysis of variance, Fisher’s exact test, Fisher information and discriminant analysis. Recently, however, Fisher’s personal views on eugenics have been criticized as incompatible with contemporary values, leading to a campaign to rename the Fisher Lecture.

Subsequent discussions have sparked serious debate about the appropriateness of attaching Fisher’s name to the lecture. On one hand, the value of Fisher’s scientific contributions can be recognized independently of his views on eugenics: he has been described as “a genius who almost single-handedly created the foundations of modern statistical science.” On the other hand, eugenics is associated with beliefs that are so opposed to present-day ideals that honoring Fisher seems antithetical to societal progress and, in particular, to movements taking place today.

When grappling with the conflict between appreciating Fisher’s contributions and confronting his beliefs, we must recall that the esteem of science is maintained by a collective trust that its achievements are independent of the virtues and vices of the people who achieve them, that recognition is not granted or revoked on the pretense of personal friendship or political positioning, and that we can at once celebrate and benefit from scientific contributions while disagreeing wholeheartedly with the personal beliefs of the scientists responsible for them. Such principles are the hallmark of scientific inquiry. In line with these principles, the Fisher Lectureship was established to honor the science, not the scientist.

Renaming the Fisher Lecture would jeopardize these principles and damage public trust in science by signaling that the evaluation of scientific advances reflects not only scientific achievement but also social acceptance. By contrast, retaining the name of the Fisher Lecture, in spite of Fisher’s personal views and the mounting pressure to do otherwise, would reaffirm the commitment to this public trust and establish Statistics as a discipline that can be relied upon to confront the truth and bring it to light, even when doing so is uncomfortable or inconvenient.

As part of its duty to the field, to the rest of science and to society as a whole, COPSS should retain the name of the Fisher Lecture as a reminder of our ability as humans and our duty as scholars to uphold the core ideals of the Enlightenment by approaching all ideas with reason and judging them based on their substance, independently of the individual with whom those ideas originated. Living up to this standard means being able to recognize the importance of Fisher’s scholarly contributions while also confronting his personal views on eugenics and acknowledging the broader role that eugenics has played in the history of statistics. So we propose to amend the Fisher Lecture description to read as follows:

The R.A. Fisher Lectureship was established in 1963 by COPSS to honor both the contributions of Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher and the work of a present-day statistician for their advancement of statistical theory and applications. The Fisher Lectureship is a very high recognition of meritorious achievement and scholarship in statistical science and recognizes highly significant impact of statistical methods on scientific investigations. The award winner will receive a plaque and a cash honorarium of \$2,000, and deliver the Fisher Lecture at the Joint Statistical Meetings.

Apart from his scientific achievements, Fisher supported eugenics, which has deep roots in the history of statistics but is associated with beliefs and practices that are now considered dehumanizing. In 2020, after vigorous debate over whether to rename the Lectureship, the statistics community decided to retain its name, to reaffirm our ability as humans and our duty as scholars to approach all ideas with reason and judge them based on their substance, independently of the individual with whom those ideas originated.

Beyond addressing Fisher’s views, amending the description in this way formally acknowledges the role of eugenics in the history of statistics while upholding core scholarly principles.

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