



BOOK REVIEWS

From the Guest Editor

Here is more on “the book that does not exist,” as Winkelstein has put it (1). A text on the history of epidemiology is badly needed. Meanwhile, a collection of papers, written by both professional historians and epidemiologists, has become available (2–8) and can provide useful material for courses dedicated to history in the teaching curriculum of epidemiology scholars. *Social and Preventive Medicine (International Journal in Public Health)* started publishing these papers in January 2001. Most were presented at a workshop on the history of epidemiology, entitled “Measuring Our Scourges,” held in Annecy, France, on July 1–10, 1996.

The Annecy workshop focused on the history of epidemiologic methods rather than on specific achievements of epidemiology in controlling plagues such as cholera, tuberculosis, malaria, typhoid fever, or lung cancer. The rationale was the following: Students of epidemiology learn successfully how to describe the states of health of populations and how to investigate outbreaks. Then they will learn, with increasing degrees of complexity, to understand and to apply the design of prospective and retrospective studies, and the concepts of bias, confounding, and interaction. They also come to think in terms of causation, with different levels of sophistication. Because they have mastered this set of methods and concepts, are able to adapt them to specific research questions, and can make them evolve when encountering new types of problems, these students become (and are given positions as) “epidemiologists” rather than any other kind of scientist.

In this context, it is crucial to understand the historical process that led to the emergence and formalization of the methods we use today. Methods, just as diseases or scientists do, have their own history. Being aware of their genesis and of the context in which they were developed not only is of cultural interest but also is indispensable for their critical appraisal. Our methodological tools were often developed while trying to solve specific problems in specific social and scientific environments. The concept of confounding, for example, seems to have been borrowed largely from statis-

tics and sociology and refined as part of the controversy about recognizing the harmful effect of tobacco (9).

To offer support to people who would like to use this material for teaching purposes, the publisher of this journal (Birkhäuser Verlag AG, Basel, Switzerland) has authorized us to place the published papers, along with the related editorials, in pdf format on a Web site (<http://www.epidemiology.ch/history>). If you do use this material, please share with us your joys as well as your frustrations. Remember: the book does not exist.

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Cancer Precursors: Epidemiology, Detection, and Prevention

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Recent advances in epidemiologic and laboratory research have contributed to our understanding of the molecular and

morphologic characteristics underlying neoplastic progression of cancer. As new methodologies improve our ability to