



International  
Epidemiological  
Association

European Epidemiology Federation

**NEWS LETTER**

**Winter 2004/5**

[www.dundee.ac.uk/iea/euro\\_Contents.html](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/iea/euro_Contents.html)

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the word "for health" on almost any kind of of life science related research nor in prompting at one level the collection of statistical health indicators and at another level biological , pathophysiological and clinical projects . Results at the latter level can only be beneficial in public health terms, and health indicators can only be interpretable, if analytical epidemiological studies have demonstrated their actual pertinence and value for health at the level of European populations.

Third epidemiologists should work out a long term strategy , that necessarily involves personnel as well as financial resources : we need to further develop epidemiological research capacities and we need a funding system that to a substantial extent driven by the health needs in the 25 states Europe. The strategy should include plans for coordinating large population based studies and request funding for such studies that includes proper overheads to maintain in the long term these studies. It should also include plans on how to make research data of public health importance available for all researchers, while retaining a key responsibility for those who developed the original idea of collecting the data and for those who actually did it. As to the EU funding system it should be requested that is fair and is based on the principle of equal competition of research ideas, rather than of research management capabilities, as it happens with the present FP6 funding system giving priority to very large and complex projects.

These are the key issues that need to be elaborated by all European epidemiologists concurring to strengthen the European research collaboration by taking part, now not tomorrow, in the research policy-making effort activated by IEA-EEF.

*Rodolfo Saracci*

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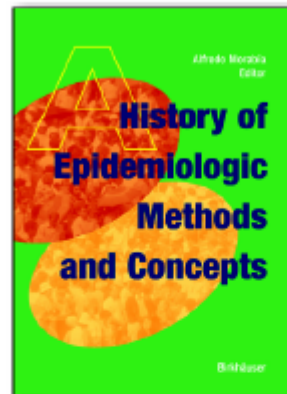
### **A history of epidemiologic methods and concepts**

Edited by Alfredo Morabia

Published by Birkhäuser / Springer, 2004.

www.birkhauser.ch

424 pages. Softcover. €78. ISBN 3-7643-6818-7



Often during 2004 I have sensed a peculiar 'historical mood' around us, epidemiologists... It is clearly present in the debate with (and on) Olli Miettinen in the *European Journal of Epidemiology* (vol. 19, issue 8, August 2004). The attraction of epidemiologic history is also evident in the fantastic series of historical reprints and commentaries published by George Davey Smith and Shah Ebrahim in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, our outstanding, highly-ranked official journal; in the book on Archibald Cochrane, *Back to the front*, edited by Xavier Bosch (Barcelona, 2004); in the book on the history of "modern epidemiology" that the IEA Council is planning with Walter Holland; and, of course, in the book by Alfredo Morabia that makes the object of this commentary. I am sure this recent surge of attention to the history of epidemiology is largely a reflection of the many achievements we can be proud of, learn from, use, and enjoy.

The book by Alfredo Morabia is very likely to be one of those few books whose reading is 'pleasantly unavoidable' for

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epidemiologists and for anyone seriously interested in research methods in clinical medicine and public health. Very likely to become one of the most important epidemiologic books published in the present decade.

Understandably, we sometimes overlook that methods have their 'own' –socially embedded– history, just as diseases, epidemiologic evidence, or the 'invisible colleges' and schools of epidemiology. Yet, it is important for scientists to know the genesis of the methods we use and teach, the trail followed by methods and empirical studies, the social and scientific context in which research is developed.

Unfortunately, the technological, industrial, civil and political forces that during the XX century have furthered the evolution of epidemiologic methods have not yet been systematically studied. Let us think, for instance, of methods to study health effects of environmental tobacco smoke or urban pollution, of the role of business organisations in commissioning epidemiologic studies on occupational and environmental exposures and facilities (asbestos, lead, PCBs and dioxins, incinerators, nuclear plants...), of the role of the chemical and food industries in shaping research on the adverse effects of drugs and pesticides, of the influence of governmental and non-governmental organisations on research on global climate change... It seems obvious that –for good and bad– epidemiologic methods owe a great deal to all such processes.

"A History of Epidemiologic Methods and Concepts" is partly based on a collection of contributions which first appeared in *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin (SPM) - International Journal of Public Health*. Most of them stemmed from a workshop on the history of epidemiology entitled "Measuring our scourges", held in Annecy, France, in 1996. The contributions focus on the historical emergence of current epidemiological methods and their relative importance at different points in

time to help control cholera, tuberculosis, malaria, typhoid fever, or lung cancer. The papers present the history of designs such as 'prospective' and 'retrospective' studies, as well as that of concepts (e.g., bias, confounding, interaction). Other important issues are also tackled (e.g., causality, disease registries, prognosis), as do the great innovators and developers of epidemiology (William Farr, John Snow, Karl Pearson, Ronald Ross, Major Greenwood, Austin B. Hill...).

Authors of chapters include Jan Vandembroucke, Paolo Vineis, Benedetto Terracini, Ezra and Mervyn Susser, Olli Miettinen, Ken Rothman, John Eyler, Richard Doll, Anne Hardy, Steven Stellmann, and Nigel Path.

The compilation of articles is complemented by a 125-pages introduction by the editor, which puts them in the context of current epidemiological knowledge; this is the fundamental nucleus of the book. A unified list of references, an index of persons and a detailed subject index also reflect the careful and skilled editing of Alfredo Morabia.

The volume will be useful and thought-provoking to any epidemiologist and to many health professionals. It also provides rich teaching materials for all sorts of courses of epidemiology, public health and clinical research methods. Discussion at our seminars and scientific meetings of the issues analysed in this book will be most relevant and timely. I believe it will also identify wide gaps in our knowledge on the social influences of epidemiologic methods, research and practice.

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