Occupational and Environmental Medicine

Editorial

Methodology series in *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*

This month's *Journal* carries the first in the series of articles about methodological issues in occupational and environmental medicine that we will be publishing over the next year or so. The first four articles will appear in sequential issues of the *Journal* and subsequent articles will appear at intervals. The purpose of the series is partly educational; the articles will describe current methods in important areas and so bring non-specialists up to date. Any relevant methods can be included, whether they are from epidemiology, toxicology, occupational hygiene, psychology, physics, ergonomics, or other disciplines. The wide range of disciplines that may be involved illustrates the breadth of the field of occupational and environmental medicine. It is not possible for us all to be expert in all areas but it is important that we have an overview of the sorts of methods that can and are being used to take forward our understanding of the relation between occupational and environmental exposures and human health.

The article by David Coggon (p 562) is not so much a description of methods that are used to investigate environmental health risks as a discussion of the issues and difficulties involved, with some pointers for the way forward. The second article is by Noah Seixas and Harvey Checkoway and describes the methods that have been developed over recent years to improve the assessment of industry-specific occupational exposures in retrospective epidemiological studies. Poor exposure data has long been a factor limiting the conclusions that can be drawn from such studies, but recent methods allow a much better estimate of individual exposures over time. The piece by Kerry Gardiner covers the related concern of making occupational hygiene assessments that are useful for subsequent epidemiology and prevention. All too often hygiene measurements are made without thought for their subsequent use and an important opportunity can be missed. Returning to more general environmental exposures, when usually there are no exposure measurements or even estimates available, in the fourth article of the series Paul Elliott describes methods for measuring disease risk in small (geographic) areas; how to decide, for example, whether a cluster of cases of a rare disease is

related to a hazardous local exposure. Further planned articles cover such areas as measuring effects of exposures on fertility, standard setting for occupational exposures, modern methods of biological monitoring, reading of chest radiographs for epidemiological studies, and methods of measuring air pollutants.

I hope that you will enjoy reading the articles. The second purpose of including them is to stimulate debate and discussion among readers with related expertise. Letters commenting on the articles or offering further insights on the topics they cover are welcomed. We cannot publish correspondence as quickly as a weekly journal but we will do our best to include letters and replies as soon as possible after the original article. The letters pages of this *Journal* have carried lively and sometimes passionate debate in the past and this is a tradition that is worth continuing; it is one of the ways of encouraging progress in our specialty.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH DICENNIAL SUPPLEMENT

The latest edition of the Registrar General's Occupational Health Dicennial Supplement has recently been published. Many readers will be familiar with previous editions of this worthy but indigestible tome; it was the sort of thing you would dig out of the library to use or refer to one of the long tables on mortality in different occupational groups. But it was definitely not a book you would consider actually reading. In the Book Review section of this month's *Journal*, Malcolm Harrington reviews the latest edition of the Dicennial Supplement. From what he says, this is a different animal altogether from previous editions. The Office of Population, Census, and Survey and the Health and Safety Executive are to be congratulated on attempting to make this important work more accessible. But it is a pity that its publication did not receive more media coverage. Surely there is much in it that would be of interest to the general public? Discussion in the mass media of the topics in this sort of publication can help to educate and inform people about the importance of occupational health risks and encourage their support of preventive efforts.

ANNE COCKCROFT