Editors’ Note

Figure of the Year

Science and scientific communication increasingly rely on visual representations of data, thanks in part to trailblazers such as Edward Tufte. To date, however, epidemiology has not embraced innovative graphics and data visualization to the same extent as some other fields; epidemiologic communications frequently rely more heavily on tables than on figures.

For example, in the 14 original contribution articles published in the Journal in November 2013 (1–14), there were a total of 48 tables and 19 figures, including those cited in appendices. Of these 14 papers, 4 contained no figures and 6 more contained only 1 figure, whereas 0 contained no tables; in several cases, the only figure was an enrollment flowchart. In only 2 papers were there more figures than tables.

Tables are extremely useful; however, figures are often as useful as or more useful than tables. Figures are more appropriate than tables for the communication of certain types of data. An obvious example is causal directed acyclic graphs, which are in fact well-represented in epidemiology journals in general and the American Journal of Epidemiology in particular. However, different types of figures as well as more figures overall are possible in these pages.

Starting in 2014, the Editors of the Journal will encourage authors to submit more and better figures by recognizing the Figure of the Year. This award will distinguish the single best scientific figure published by the print edition of the Journal in the calendar year, whether that figure shows study results or is an illustration of methodological concepts.

CRITERIA: WHAT MAKES A GREAT SCIENTIFIC FIGURE?

Noah Iliinsky (one of the authors of Designing Data Visualizations (15) and editor and contributor author of Beautiful Visualization: Looking at Data Through the Eyes of Experts (16)) states, “The job of an excellent scientific figure is to reveal the information to the intended audience (practitioner, public, or both) in a way that is clear, compelling, and enlightening. The best figures offer access to deep insight and are notably superior by several of these measures” (Noah Iliinsky, personal communication, 2013). Iliinsky further suggests that a beautiful figure may be thought of as one that is simultaneously informative, novel, efficient, and aesthetic, in balance (16). Here, we are interested in considering scientific figures that are both excellent and beautiful. However, here we will favor function over form.

AWARD PROCESS AND DETAILS

At the end of the calendar year, the Editor-in-Chief will solicit nominations from the Editors of the American Journal of Epidemiology and will review the nominations by members of the Society for Epidemiologic Research and other readers of the Journal made directly to the Editor-in-Chief. Nominations should include a brief paragraph describing what makes the figure superior and worthy of consideration, and these paragraphs will be published (with possible revisions) along the winning figure (see below).

The Editor-in-Chief may consider a small group of individuals to help review the nominated figures in order to choose a winner. The award winner will be announced at the Society’s annual meeting. The corresponding author of the winning figure (or their designee, if a co-author or nonauthor was primarily responsible for the figure) will receive a framed high-resolution reproduction of the figure. An announcement about the figure will appear in the Society’s annual meeting program book, and the figure will be republished in a special online “Best of the Year” edition of the Journal, along with the nominating paragraph and possible other commentary about the ways in which the figure exhibits excellence. The “Best of the Year” online-only issue will be released in conjunction with the Society’s annual meeting.

REFERENCES


Daniel J. Westreich, on behalf of the Journal and the Society for Epidemiologic Research