EDITORIAL

The Education Corner: updates on new and established core concepts and methods in epidemiology

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Do you have that sinking feeling that you are lagging behind? Your bright young PhD student says she has drawn a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG) and now asks for your views on the likelihood of having collider bias and whether there are any backdoor paths that need to be considered. Reeling from this you are assaulted by a less bright student who has got his instrumental variables muddled with his latent variables. Seeking relief you open the February issue of the IJE only to find that there is now two-stage Mendelian Randomization,1 and you have only just got the hang of basic Mendelian Randomization. And worse, it is full of epigenetics,2 which confusingly seems to contradict what you have learned from TIME magazine.3

Relax. With this issue of the IJE we launch a new section, ‘The Education Corner’. The purpose of this section is to provide concise updates and reviews of epidemiological concepts and methods suitable for educational use. We will select relevant topics ranging from study design and implementation to data analyses and offer short descriptions of new
developments, appropriate applications and common pitfalls. This section does not aim to be a series of articles constituting an introduction to epidemiology like those previously supplied by the Lancet or to replace an introductory or advanced textbook in epidemiology. Instead, we will present selected topics that are not adequately covered in epidemiology textbooks or we may take a new perspective on older topics. We aim to provide a service to the epidemiology community in making relevant methodological topics accessible, transparent and easily understood.

Articles in the Education Corner will be brief illustrations of epidemiological methods, not too complicated, not too basic, whether recently developed or a variation on a known theme, using simple arithmetic, intuitive analogies and examples as main tools. It is intended that the Education Corner will provide useful material for teaching the next generation of epidemiologists as well as for self-instruction.

We want to avoid long-winded or technically complex expositions of a topic. Textbooks and in-depth review articles provide that function. The Education Corner will present crisp, to-the-point articles, avoiding technical jargon. Cartoons will always be welcome as we are all getting a little bored with spinning circles for generations of random associations—but show it one last time to demonstrate how much sense can be communicated so simply.

The Education Corner will focus on two types of contributions:

1. Methods, comments and news: These articles will comment on established methods that are currently misused or misinterpreted or present cutting-edge methods explaining their use, purpose, range and limits of applications.
2. Educational notes: these contributions aim to provide answers to the frequently asked question: ‘Where can I find an understandable presentation of this topic’? They aim at conveying and exemplifying how a method works.

This issue of IJE includes the first contribution to the Education Corner: ‘Classification of epidemiological study designs.’ It discusses classification of epidemiological studies in incidence and prevalence studies. We selected this article as first contribution to the Education Corner because it addresses fundamental concepts in epidemiology.

We would be excited to receive articles giving important insights into methods routinely used that are never published in textbooks or articles, clarifications and examples of misuse of methods. We are keen to provoke discussion, so if an area is controversial, then debate about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches provides important learning. Style is important too. Recipes for successful use of SAS to carry out Cox regression is not what we want. Socratic dialogue between a student and a teacher on a complex topic may be more illuminating than the cookbook approach. We will be happy to entertain suggestions prior to submission of articles to the Education Corner. The typical size of a paper should be between 2000 and 4000 words (including tables, figures and references) but shorter contributions are also welcome. Whereas we may occasionally commission pieces, all will be peer reviewed.

References

5. Pearce N. Classification of epidemiological study designs. *Int J Epidemiol* 2012;41:393–97.