

LETTERS

On doctors' advice

I share John Flynn's concerns (February letters) about the publication advice given by the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* regarding the role of statistical science and statisticians. The apparent trivialisation of our input is a long-standing problem and there have been more radical and strident views expressed by journal editors in the past.

However, John's suggestion that 'our learned professional body, the RSS, should continuously be warning members to avoid being under-estimated, under-valued and, presumably, under-charged for our contribution' is, in my view, not a solution. Respect is earned, not demanded. It is also important for our profession to understand that any interaction is a two-way street. While some statisticians bemoan their claimed under-valued, un-loved and un-cherished status among scientific peers, others would argue that we've not always been the best advocates of our own scientific worth.

A colleague working in one of our environmental protection agencies once likened his experience with statisticians with root canal surgery, only more painful. As a profession we must work to remain credible and relevant; the respect will then follow and it won't have to be demanded. John Flynn's suggestion that without statistical input publications such as the *BMJ* would otherwise be 'mediocre' is disingenuous and may help explain the root of the problem.

David Fox
Melbourne



Regarding John Flynn's letter about parochial use of statisticians, good access to executives is powerful and sufficient. Perhaps Deming was early to recognize this in about 1950. Juran stressed the importance of speaking management language. Signals are also important.

This gives a forum to convey something of the passion statisticians have for the subject and to use every opportunity to teach a little more in terms they can relate to more successfully running a business. Most such communications are five minutes, a one-line email or a sentence in

passing in the hallway. The benefits accrue and grow over several years with any given executive.

I have been able to gain support this past 20 years in many organizations for the complete statistical work John Flynn describes, from conception, or certainly inception, including statistical design through execution to analysis, reporting and implementation with monitoring. This was after perhaps ten years of stumbling to work out how to best gain executive access. Executive teams also provide an excellent forum for improving statistical practice, by listening and discussing (quickly) with an intelligent and curious cohort.

I find discussions are more effective if one uses scientific (rather than only statistical) language and concepts, suitably abbreviated. Presumably, similar access to the *British Medical Journal* editors/executives would accomplish a similar effect. It may take time to build but a start could be made. It is essential to work persuasively at all levels and there are different languages for scientists, engineers, blue collar workers, marketers etc.

In cases where appropriate access and involvement is denied, one can simply decline the work. This pays off especially well, in the long term, in being able to conduct complete statistical work. If the choice is made to accept inappropriate assignments it damages the statistician and the profession.

I have found no difference between working as a consultant to clients and being a member of an organization (though it helps to have an executive position in the latter). The suggestion for the RSS to reinforce this issue with members is certainly helpful but a formal education/qualification in statistics will already have made the issue clear. It's an individual professional responsibility and entirely within the statistician's control. Of course, diplomacy helps.

It may be useful for the RSS to provide a forum to explain how to gain access to and work with executives. After studying theory and then serving an apprenticeship with experienced statisticians on real industrial/government problems, working with executives and managers becomes an important skill to seek.

Kieron Dey
Oak Ridge
Tennessee



The *BMJ* has helped lead the way in improving statistical analysis and presentation in medical journals in recent years and shown its commitment by including an independent statistician on every research hanging committee.

The article quoted has never in fact appeared in the *BMJ* but was on the separate *BMJ Careers* website and was published in February 2006 when it was still a separate publication.

In addition to this, as John Flynn notes in the title, the article is only part 2 of a short piece on helping junior doctors to understand how a research project is organised. Had he also looked at part 1, he would have noted the paragraph on statisticians, advising that they be involved right from the outset on design and analysis of any research project to ensure that the final data is not inherently flawed.

Far from undervaluing statisticians it describes their contribution as 'invaluable' and recommends they are fellow authors on all papers.

Edward Davies, editor, *BMJ Careers*
Fiona Godlee, editor-in-chief, *BMJ*
(via Mike Campbell, Sheffield)

Whose figures?

I thought you might be interested in a remark I heard on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme at 8.50 on 22 January. James Naughtie was interviewing Phil Woolas (Minister of State for Borders and Immigration) about migration between Poland and the UK.

Phil Woolas said 'They're ONS figures, not government figures, Jim'.

Exercise for the student: Discuss the above remark, referring to the Rayner review of government statistics under Margaret Thatcher and more recent government problems with spin.

Nic Wright
Bury St Edmunds

Conference

One key topic is absent in the list of topics for the annual conference: the validity of data. This is the most important issue in any statistical study. I came across it in my first assignment in ICI. The subject is not addressed in the school syllabus either. Hence nowadays any numbers will do and when they are put through a computer they are made respectable.

I have been involved in defending product claims internationally with advertising boards, the Committee on Safety of Medicine and with legal cases. In every case the validity of the data was a key issue. As a profession we have a lot to learn from other professions, particularly the legal and engineering professions.

An excellent paper that should be read by all students is by J M Hammersley in *The Statistician*, 23 (2), June 1974.

Tony Baker
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