

LETTERS

The Health Group have received two letters from different correspondents at the "Istituto per la Sicurezza Sociale Bernardino Ramazzini" at Bologna, Italy.

Dear Sir,

19/11/76

We read on Lancet (Sept 6 page 1035) a short note about your evaluation of the Department of Health's consultative document on priorities in the health and personal social services.

We find a straight correlation between problems you emphasize and problems we are going to debate i.e. setting priorities, taking into account all the factors which influence health and, first of all, democratic participation in decision making.

Therefore we are very interested in your comments, your associations and your papers.

So we subscribe to obtain "Whose Priorities?", but we are also very interested in a regular exchange of information about common problems: for instance have you done something about social indicators, on measurement of output of medical service etc.?

Our Social Security Institute is doing something about these problems, and we were very happy to know your ideas about them.

for the Epidemiology Unit

Dear Sir,

31/1/77

Firstly, I am very apologetic for coming so late with my letter (and my money!): during one month, I was far from Bologna. By reading your pamphlet, we realized you are engaged with the same problems we have.

In Italy too (and much more than in G B) we have a lack of growth in the economy, and immediately a cut of social expenditures. This is the economic law (?) governing (capitalistic) nations: an economic recession means less power for the workers, and so a reduction of wages, of social services, of social security systems. So we have no prevention (primary prevention): environmental health is "expensive"; prevention is not the responsibility of the state but of the individual (did you read in "Preventive Medicine" the forum on behavioural science and prevention?): many authors in Italy are saying that "It is enough a life without smoking."

On the other side, but the same reasons, we have many "diagnostic centres" for screenings; something like Kaiser foundation centers. Obviously, they are private (drugs industries) properties.

So we are!

Yours sincerely

John Hall (of the Polytechnic of North London) writes somewhat bitterly about the declining standards of Invicta Plastics super successful "Mastermind" game. He purchased a set of "Super Mastermind" (8 colours, 5 holes) to find it contained a mere 5 blue pegs (therefore making the solution impossible) and was 45 pegs short in all. The second set (presumably a replacement for the first) was 38 pegs short. He encloses a letter from R L Macey Senior Inspector of Weights and Measures, Borough of Haringey, Consumer Protection Service, who explains that, to reduce costs, the number of pegs in "Super Mastermind" have been reduced from 192 to 160 and that John suggests that readers might investigate their own sets and offer tables of \bar{X} and SD_x .

Dear Alderman

9/2/77

SuperMastermind ...

"To coincide with the reduction in number a new leaflet was printed and the old stock destroyed. However, it now seems that a number of old leaflets were inadvertently packed with the new games and the manufacturers claim that your complaint is the first to come to their attention. The Chairman of the Company has personally apologised for this mistake and has asked me to pass on to you a number of pegs which I enclose."

Yours faithfully

Senior Inspector of Weights & Measures

Dear Lee

12/2/77

Thank you for your letter about 'Radical Statistics.'

First of all, I enjoyed RS8 much more than some previous issues. I think this was because a number of the articles were aimed at persuading the unconvinced, with carefully presented evidence (e.g. Donald Mackenzie's paper). Political jargon and generalisations have the opposite effect, I find. I hope you'll be able to encourage the persuasive approach. A number of people see my copy of Rad Stats, and I think we might be surprised if we could see all the odd corners it gets into.

My letter to RS7 was a bit confused. One point I tried to make was that (I suspect) some problems are so complex that to try to measure and model them statistically is a poor use of management skills. My impression is that there can be a lot of status involved in building (and reporting on) a big simulation model, or in setting up an O.R. department; and we ought to be getting het up when status takes second place to good policy.

Let me give an example. Recently we finished a joint project with the GLC on causes of irregularity on bus routes, and how to improve them. Detailed surveys, statistical analysis, and a simulation model - over nearly three years - have gone into producing a report, which is now publicly available; if you read it, you might think that a committee consisting of a philosopher, a bus driver, a policeman and a journalist could have done a better job quicker. Do we have any experience of giving place to such committees (or co-operating with them)? I believe we should be worried that RS is so much centred on public service/ academic life and so little on industry. There are many differences between the two worlds, and it's work asking what's causing the different in interest.

G. Rendle

40 Warwick Road,
St Albans,
Herts.
March 2 1977

Dear Lee,

I was most disturbed to get your message that you were publishing John Bibby's article on infant mortality in this issue of the newsletter after all. As you had said it would be held over, I did not of course get round to either writing a reply or passing comments back to him. (In fact I hoped to lumber someone else who is better informed than me to do it). If John had read the literature on the subject he would have noticed that a good number of the authors' names appear on the Radical Statistics mailing list.

Needless to say I agree very much with John's political point. It is a pity that his analysis which follows illustrates the problems of inexperience so well. There isn't time to embark on a detailed technical criticism (such points as are the abortions spontaneous or surgically induced, how can the stillbirth rate for social classes 1 and 2 combined exceed the perinatal death rate although this may be explained by the exclusion of illegitimate babies from his perinatal rate etc. etc.) but by dismissing the number of previous children born as a 'little finesse' he ignores the additional risks involved in having a first baby if the mother is very young or 'elderly' (as obstetricians kindly term the over 30's) and the risks for older women having a lot of children. Of course working class women tend to start having children younger than middle class ones making comparisons more difficult particularly if the numbers involved are small as they would be in a small country like Scotland.

I could go on but I feel it is more important to raise a point of principle. We obviously don't want to censor free expression in the newsletter or set up a refereeing bureaucracy, and I appreciate that John's motive for launching prematurely into print was that you were short of articles and he nobly offered to help fill a gap. But I equally feel that it is important that articles should be difficult to fault on a simple technical level, as it would appear that the newsletter gets read by outsiders, not just subscribers. Some people will have seen a recent article in New Society on home confinement ('Where to be born', Marjorie Tew Jan 20, p120-1). The statistical analysis could only be described as atrocious, or ill-informed and naive if you want to be charitable. The contributors to the correspondence which followed had a field day pointing out the technical faults and the important question at issue (DHSS policy is that all women should have their babies in hospital but they never did any trials to see if it really was better for low risk women) was never properly discussed at all. It is potentially dangerous when articles are published like this on subjects which a number of people in the group are involved in, as they can be used against us, to dismiss points which we may feel to be important.

Could you please make every effort to include this in the newsletter with John Bibby's article.

Alison Macfarlane