

Editorial Meanderings

This newsletter is very late. Summer, no copy and sheer laziness are the major reasons. But never fear, those honourable persons with subs, the AGM agreed that subs lasted for three issues rather than a year.

A new subgroup has poked its head above the parapet: and the royal we extend a warm welcome to Nicaragua Statistics Fund. Otherwise only two of the groups have woken me from my coma: the Health group still ferreting away at a fast-disappearing bunch of official statistics;* and the Race group claiming that some kind of draft is hatching out with Gower.

The inequalities in health saga has, of course, been revitalised with the non-publication by the OPCS of social class differences and we all look forward to the Health groups analysis. Julien Le Grand has not yet submitted a reply to the critical articles in RSN35 (but plans to prepare a piece for the next newsletter). However, he read a paper to the British Association jointly with Raymond Illsley, which includes a rather important caveat "We are clear that these indices do not address the same problems as that addressed by class death rates. In particular they do not pretend directly to measure the effects of social and economic inequality" (p. 24).

One has the feeling that a few forests would have been spared and several raised blood pressures avoided if that had been made clear at the beginning!

The other main piece included - from Cathie Marsh - needs a little introduction. It was written - pretty obviously! - soon

*The Health Group and this Editor are grateful to Maternity Alliance for permission to reproduce an Editorial from Maternity Action (p. 11).

after the Brecon by-election, but the intervening issues have turned out pretty fat, partly because of the furore over (the measurement of) inequalities in health; also Cathie's article has never been immediately relevant so it was passed on and over. I have included it because the silly season for regular polling, as a run-up to the next sham exercise in "democracy", is starting and it is worth remembering the exceedingly shaky foundations of these polls.

Cathie tells me that she has conducted a comparison of quota and random sampling across randomised polling districts demonstrating the very wide variability of quota sampling estimates around the random sample estimates. The - perhaps obvious - point is that quota samples tend to cluster. I can add my own tuppennyworth: in days when I had the cash flow to bet on elections, I always chose those polls with the most widely dispersed set of sampling points - and I always won.

The "missing" piece would spell out the front cover. Whilst I comprehend estimates of risk based on past experience and, with a following wind, can keep up with Bayesian calculations, I have simply never understood how those prospective estimates of risks of a nuclear accident are devised. Can anyone help? Seriously, though, the wild swings from "it'll never happen" to "70% chance in the next decade in Western Europe" deserve dissecting not just to uncover the obvious attempts to protect the nuclear industry but also to "demystify" those calculations. Any offers?

Finally, although there certainly will be another Newsletter before the next AGM, it is worth soliciting your reactions to the Health Group's proposal to run two mini Conferences as the Open session of the AGM. It would obviously require more pre-publicity than usual. What do you all think?

Data, Hypotheses, Stories and the 'Truth'

This extremely short piece is not just a space filler. I'm appealing for help. I've been asked to write a background paper for a Conference on "When is a Data Set Complete". The organisers basically want me to get at those with large funds and little sense who data dredge, and whose results are of dubious value. Now, I can obviously whither on about the relative cost effectiveness of increasing sample size and about the extraordinary value of setting out, at least some, hypotheses before you start. I can also pontificate about the enormous difference between statistical defeat of a hypothesis and proof of a positive, and between common-sense 'certainty' and the form of statistical findings. But it seems a bit thin. Any other ideas? All contributions gratefully acknowledged.

One other possible line to which I'd like your reactions is that whilst some might be gathered for a purpose, they more often are used only to exemplify or illustrate a pre-conceived story. I think there is more to this than just proving what you set out to find, but I'm open to be disillusioned.

Roy Carr-Hill

