some mother and child health messages to the village community.

As mentioned above, community-based service providers are an important component of community participation. On this issue the strategy of sustainability is not well known although there are many studies. Therefore we would appreciate the opportunity to share information about community participation – community service providers’ strategies and activities.

Yours faithfully,

Hilal Özcebe
Levent Akin
Associate Professors
Department of Public Health,
Faculty of Medicine, Hacettepe University,
06100, Sihhiye, Ankara, Turkey

Putting flesh on the bones of epidemiology

Sirs,

My return to formal education after many years in the National Health Service has changed my reading habits dramatically. A long-standing interest in history and biography has been supplemented by the need to understand subjects as diverse as economics, anthropology and epidemiology. At first I saw these two elements as quite separate. Now I am not so sure.

One book in particular has captivated me. Angela’s Ashes,1 the 1997 Pulitzer Prize winning book by the Irish–American author Frank McCourt, is a harrowing story of an Irish family in the 1930s. The book, set in Limerick, describes how the author’s family struggled against the endemic poverty and ill health – according to McCourt ‘worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish catholic childhood’. The
disadvantages faced by the McCourt family were made much worse by their father's alcoholism, the consequences of which seemed to frustrate every attempt to improve their situation.

McCourt's account offers many illustrations of the experience of health and disease in Limerick in the 1930s. From October to April, 'above all we were wet', with hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes and consumptive croaks. The gap between knowledge and the ability to make healthy choices was apparent even then. McCourt's mother knew of the risk of rickets from using bottles of sugar and water to assuage her children's hunger but could not afford milk. She smoked her Woodbines 'as the only comfort she has' even though she knows it is 'bad for your chest, stunts your growth, bad for your lungs, and rots your teeth'. The children dreamed of boiled eggs but at times were reduced to sucking the fat from discarded chip wrappings.

Our other sources of information about the health of the population of Limerick at this time are the annual reports of the local medical officer of health. These confirm how accurate many of McCourt's observations were. He notes that Limerick is a 'place where there is a scarcity of grey hairs' - in the 1936 Census, those over 65 were 10 per cent of the Irish population but only 6 per cent of those living in Limerick. He shows that those living on the banks of the Shannon were well aware of their increased risk of tuberculosis, even though few would have seen the statistics showing that their risk of dying from the disease was almost four times that in County Roscommon. The high childhood mortality, nearly five times higher than in Ireland as a whole, was reflected in his accounts of the regularity with which friends had three days off school when their siblings died.

McCourt also provides much information that helps us to understand the determinants of disease. The complex relationship between alcohol, poverty, and premature death is well illustrated: 'heaven is where all fathers bring home the money from the labour exchange and you don't have to be running around the pubs to find them'. The intergenerational consequences become clear as he describes how several members of his family had suffered from being dropped on their heads, apparently a common result of drunken fathers playfully throwing their children in the air.

It is too easy for us to forget that every health statistic represents a human being. If we are to truly understand the health conditions of a population, we need to look beyond the quantitative data. Personal accounts, such as Angela's Ashes, put the flesh on the bones of a student's understanding of epidemiology.

Reference