Editorial

The New “Snippets From the Past” and a New Section About “Epidemiology in History”

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My task in the American Journal of Epidemiology (AJE) will be 2-fold. I will continue the regular publication of “Snippets From the Past,” a section that George Comstock originally carried out between 1991 and 2005, and I will orchestrate the management, peer review, and eventual publication in AJE of invited and unsolicited papers for a new section of the Journal entitled “Epidemiology in History.”

SNIPPETS FROM THE PAST

I have the great honor of continuing George W. Comstock’s “Snippets From the Past.” Dr. Comstock published a total of 14 of these articles over 15 years (1–14). His idea was to publish 1 article per year that comprised a summary of the content from an archived volume of the American Journal of Hygiene (AJH), which became AJE in 1965 (15). In accordance with the subtitle of the section, “Seventy Years Ago in the Journal,” he went back 70 years to find his content (to 1921 for 1991, 1922 for 1992, and so on). Dr. Comstock was able to cover the period of 1921 to 1934, discussing some specific papers more in detail, regularly commenting on the length of the papers and on the number of female authors, and reporting personal anecdotes.

The new snippets section will build on Dr. Comstock’s idea of revisiting the history of epidemiology through the traces it left in AJH and in AJE. However, a quick count reveals that at the pace of 1 article per year, I cannot guarantee, even under extremely optimistic assumptions, that I will be able to cover the 75 years of AJH and AJE’s existence that remain uncovered by Comstock’s snippets. Thirty years from now, I would only be reaching the 1965 transition to AJE. I therefore asked the Editors of AJE to drop the subheading “Seventy Years Ago in the Journal” and was granted the authorization to do so.

My plan is to prolong Comstock’s heritage by tracking the history of epidemiologic methods and concepts in the publications of the Journal from 1921 to today. For example, when did cohort studies or case-control studies first appear in the Journal? How synchronized was the Journal with the overall evolution in the field? Similarly, how did the Journal’s authors deal with the concepts of confounding, bias, interaction, and causal thinking across time? The Journal has had a pioneering role in many of these domains. I will also discuss the contributions of specific epidemiologists in the Journal. For example, what did Wade Hampton Frost publish in AJH? I will address similar questions for Raymond Pearl, Charles-Edward A. Winslow, and Charles V. Chapin in AJH and for classic and modern epidemiologists in AJE.

EPIDEMIOLOGY IN HISTORY

My second task is to launch a new section of the Journal featuring the history of our discipline. “Epidemiology in History” is intended to enrich the already existing collection of material and documents available in the epidemiology-related literature.

The American Journal of Public Health appears to have the longest tradition of publishing historical papers in its “Public Health Then and Now” (inaugurated in July 1971), “Voices From the Past” (launched in January 1996), and “Images of Health” (started in February 2001) sections. Since 2001, the International Journal of Epidemiology has published “Reprints and Reflection,” which combines the reprint of a milestone publication with a set of modern commentaries. The journal Epidemiology has been publishing “Voices,” a series of conversations with senior epidemiologists enhanced by video coverage of interviews, a biosketch, and a curriculum vitae, since 2003. In 2007, the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health launched

Abbreviations: AJE, American Journal of Epidemiology; AJH, American Journal of Hygiene.
a series entitled “Public Health Past and Present.” In 2012, *Preventive Medicine* began a section called “Philosophy and Epidemiology” that includes historical papers. The late, much missed Warren Winkelstein, Jr., published 17 historical “Vignettes” in *Epidemiology*, and many of the 25 “From the Editor” notes in *AJE* focused on the history of epidemiology. In addition, there are online repositories of historical documents and research into epidemiology, such as The James Lind Library (www.jameslindlibrary.org), the People’s Epidemiology Library (www.epidemiology.ch/PeopleEpidemiologyLibrary), and websites dedicated to John Snow (www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow.html) or the history of cardiovascular epidemiology (www.epi.umn.edu/cvdepi). These resources reflect the widespread interest in history in our discipline. I aim to find a niche that diversifies—as opposed to replicates—the content of the existing resources.

Fortunately, there is ample space for a diversity of focuses across epidemiology journals. The history of epidemiology is so much intertwined with the history of medicine, the history of diseases, the history of public health, and the history of statistics and biostatistics that it can be approached using many different angles. A priority will be given in *AJE* to papers dealing with 1) the history of the methods (study designs) and concepts (bias, confounding, interaction, causal inference), 2) the way epidemiologists frame hypotheses, 3) the life of epidemiologists, as individuals or as a scientific community, 4) the history of epidemics, 5) the history of epidemiologic organizations/associations/academic and nonacademic environments, and 6) the history of ethical and philosophical issues related to epidemiology.

The historiography of these issues is still in its infancy, in part because a close collaboration between epidemiologists and historians—or at least the joint acquisition of skills harbored by epidemiologists and historians—happens too rarely. The research methods used by epidemiologists, especially after 1900, are often not commonsensical. The skills of epidemiologists are needed to discuss how methods and concepts evolved, what was done, and the design, concepts, and analytical techniques. The careful and respectful exploration of archives by historians is indispensable in the interpretation of this evolution and the revival of the period in which it occurred, including the mentality, values, social, cultural and political life, the medical and public health context, and so on.

This initiative is therefore addressed to epidemiologists and historians, both as authors (and teams if possible) to capture and rediscover the bounty of forgotten material in existence and as guest editors, reviewers, and commentators to offer the same quality of review process for history that *AJE* can offer for epidemiologic research in general.

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REFERENCES