



RESEARCH METHODS IN GENERAL PRACTICE

R C Fraser and Nicola L M Goeting (eds)
Duphar, Southampton (1991)
 86 pages. Price £5.00

The publication of this collection of lectures aims to benefit prospective general practitioner researchers.

It starts well with an encouraging and useful introduction to research in general practice by Professor Fraser and ends with a helpful guide to writing up research by Dr Bichard, assistant editor of the *Journal* — although I wish she had followed Gower's advice to be sparing in the use of 'very'. There is also a sensible contribution from Dr Howel on how a statistician can help which is followed by an illuminating discussion on the costs of statistical advice.

The emphasis of many of the other lectures seems idiosyncratic. There are overly detailed descriptions of specialized techniques and some rather curious arguments about the advantages of interviewing over studies using self-completed questionnaires. Some topics are covered more than once, with occasional contradictions. Useful tips on grant applications are intermingled with misleading statements about the avoidance of VAT and administrative fees. Over a number of points the papers seem more likely to puzzle and discourage than to stimulate and enlighten potential researchers. What, for instance, are readers to make of randomization by an unexplained 'biased coin method'?

But the cost of the collection, by present day standards, is low at £5.00. Potential general practice researchers may find it worth the investment if they read selectively and critically.

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MEDICAL STATISTICS ON MICROCOMPUTERS

R A Brown and J S Beck
British Medical Journal, London (1991)
 103 pages. Price £8.95

Tackling the statistical aspects of general practice research projects has never been easy. This may be due to the reluctance of general practitioners to shake the dust from student notes on statistics or perhaps it seems alien for a 'personal' doctor to be wrestling with an approach which reduces individual patients to a mere list of numbers. Ignorance of statistical methods limits enquiry to anecdotal accounts of individual experience from which firm conclusions cannot be drawn. A serious attempt by the non-mathematician to analyse the results of an individual or practice project reveals two main obstacles: the difficulty in deciding which test is appropriate to the problem in hand and the labour of unaccustomed computation. The latter has been simplified by the advent of electronic calculators and eliminated by the arrival of suitable software for the ubiquitous practice microcomputer. It is now so easy to produce impressive looking printouts that the development of the original research idea from hypothesis to discussion of research findings can be obscured by the sheer volume of irrelevant material.

A reliable and friendly guide, *Medical statistics on microcomputers* by Brown and Beck, explains the rational basis of common statistical procedures and enables the reader to make informed choices when analysing his or her research data. Individual chapters do not simply deal with a particular statistical test but rather tackle a practical problem and illustrate solutions by reference to two well known statistics packages — *Minitab* and *Statgraphics*. While these packages are not cheap their superior graphic capabilities allow researchers to use many more methods than would be practicable using paper-based calculations. I particularly appreciated the chapters on data displays and the clear explanation of the advantages of using confidence intervals, a method increasingly favoured by statisticians and journal editors alike.

This slim booklet is well worth buying for its clear logic and relevant examples and would be a worthy companion to inexpensive 'shareware' statistics packages. Reprinted from a series of articles in the *Journal of Clinical Pathology* it deserves a wider audience than laboratory investigators. It offers general practice researchers a user-friendly way to better understanding of basic principles and more appropriate use of statistical techniques. Such understanding in turn helps researchers make better use of the advice of a statistician, still a scarce resource for the average general practitioner.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN HEALTH CARE

John Wilkinson
Handset press, Edinburgh (1989)
 510 pages. Price £27.50

As I picked up this book I realized that I had two needs which I hoped it would meet. First, I wanted a source book of ethical opinions with all the different arguments concerning the current ethical issues which we face today. Secondly, I wanted a book which discussed the principles and guidelines of ethics so that I could come to my own conclusions as to what I believe is right. This book admirably met both of these needs in a readable and accessible form.

Wilkinson adopts the 'principle approach' to ethics as opposed to the 'problem approach' so that the book should continue to be of value when new ethical problems present themselves. It is balanced, fair and clearly states the author's presuppositions and beliefs. The author attempts to document accurately all the differing points of view, but then clearly states his own conclusion. I disagreed with his conclusions several times, but he had already given me enough knowledge and understanding to weigh up the arguments for myself.

Each chapter is broken down into small sections for easy reading and reference. This is not a book to read right through, but I found myself constantly dipping into its pages. It has an adequate index and reading list, and after each chapter there is an extensive list of notes and references.

Finally, this is an excellent source book with quotations taken from many other works, both contemporary and historical. This

could well be the only book you need to buy on ethics from the christian viewpoint. It is not cheap, but I recommend that every practice should have a copy in their library, and every doctor interested in the approach of christianity to ethics would greatly enjoy this book and benefit from it. It should continue to be of value throughout the professional lifetime of anyone who buys it.

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LIFE AFTER NINETY

Michael Bury and Anthea Holme
Routledge, London (1991)
198 pages. Price £38.00

Life after ninety describes a survey of individuals aged 90 years and over. The aim was to obtain a representative sample of that group in England. One of the difficulties of such a study, as stated by Margot Jefferys in the foreword, is that those in this age group are of necessity short-lived and the next group of over 90 year olds are likely to be very different.

Nevertheless it is interesting to have a snap shot of this age group. General practitioners will be interested in the difficulty the researchers had in obtaining the names of those aged 90 years and over from general practitioner lists. My own experience has

been that approaching general practitioners direct helps to solve this problem.

A total of 222 people aged 90 years and over were interviewed (response rate 82%). The book gives basic information about the marital status, education and occupation of these people. This is followed by the financial circumstances of the group together with information about housing and the numbers living in communal establishments.

The point is made that this group had experienced the first world war and the enormous social and economic changes occurring around that time. The group exhibited remarkably good recall of childhood health, which appears to have been excellent, compared with the high level of infant mortality at that time.

Only 3% of the men in the group and none of the women were current smokers, although two thirds of the men had smoked at some time. About 50% of both sexes currently drank alcohol. Information on diet suggests that those who reach the age of 90 years are not particularly interested in the present day obsession with different types of diet.

All in all this is an interesting book. General practitioners will be very aware of their patients who are over 90 years of age and might like to compare notes.

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Inquiries may be directed to Dr Cindy Lam, General Practice Unit, 2/F Southern Centre, 130 Hennessy Road, Hong Kong (tel. (852) 8351859). Further particulars and application forms may be obtained from Appointments (39505), Association of Commonwealth Universities, 36 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PF, UK; or from the Appointment Unit, Registry, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (Fax (852)-5592058; E-mail APPTUNIT@HKUVM1.HKU.HK).

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