

Ethics in Turmoil

Group Of More Than 100 Epidemiologists Say Criticisms Of IARC Monograph Process Are “Unconvincing”

“As a group of international scientists, we have looked carefully at the charges of flaws and bias in the hazard evaluations by IARC Working Groups and found them unconvincing.”

This conclusion has been reached by 126 epidemiologists and scientists writing in an upcoming issue of Environmental Health Perspectives. Led by Neil Pearce, Aaron Blair, and Paolo Vineis the multi-authored review of the IARC process used to classify potential carcinogenic agents

looked at four types of criticisms that have been made about the process. The four categories of criticisms were:

- 1) Criticisms of epidemiology as a science
- 2) Attacks on the IARC process
- 3) Criticisms of specific IARC evaluations
- 4) Criticisms of the composition of the IARC workgroups.

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Epidemiologist Enlisted To Study What Works Best In Online Dating

Meta-analysis Gets Much Media Attention

We take every opportunity to report on novel uses of epidemiology. This month, a truly novel application has been reported---using epidemiology to figure out how to be more successful with online dating. We take the unusual step here of reporting

several excerpts from the press release from **Evidence Based Medicine** about the article titled “An evidence-based approach to an ancient pursuit: systematic review on converting online contact into a first date.”

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-Monographs continued from

None of the criticisms were determined to be well-founded. According to the report, "Debate and criticism facilitate self-correction and a check on the validity in science. We are concerned, however, that the criticisms expressed by a vocal minority regarding the evaluations of a few agents may promote the denigration of a process that has served the public and public health well for many decades for reasons which are not supported by the data."

Why The Review

The review was undertaken in response to criticisms of epidemiology in general, and IARC in particular, which Pearce described to *The Epidemiology Monitor* as having "got worse in the last 5-10 years." These criticisms have not been occurring in a vacuum, he said, but in a context of increasing concern about industry-funded attacks. Pearce should know because his work has been under attack several times over the years, often from industry related sources, and he has written before to defend epidemiology and his own work.

What worried Pearce about recent attacks, he told the Monitor, is that criticisms have been leveled not only against individual studies but against well-respected institutions such as IARC. "We thought that IARC was doing a good job," he said, "so we needed people to look objectively at it [IARC process]."

Pearce was quick to point out that he and his co-authors are not against

criticism which is important for IARC and for the scientific process. Criticism is always around he said but when critiques are published just before the beginning of an IARC process, then this reflects a more deliberate and calculated type of attack.

Invitations To Review

The authors of the review were invited to join the process by Pearce, Blair, and Vineis because they were known to be involved in occupational and environmental cancer research – a kind of Who's Who in that subspecialty. They drew up a list and invited everyone on the list, excluding IARC employees. Almost no invitees declined the opportunity to participate in the review, including epidemiologists and scientists who strongly disagreed with IARC about specific topics, said Pearce. Everyone ended up supporting the process as the "best around". The small number of scientists who have been publicly critical of the IARC were not invited because 'they have had their say' and it was thought their inclusion would only lead to polarization and not be productive for the review process.

Each of the 126 co-authors took responsibility for the findings according to Pearce. All sent comments, many of which led to helpful revisions. The whole exercise took about 1 year and everyone contributed something to the final product, he said.

The paper will appear shortly in *Environmental Health Perspectives*. To access the paper after publication, visit: <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov> ■

International Doctoral Program In Epidemiology Takes On A Public Health Practice Focus

Free Tuition Available For Students Accepted

Our doctoral degree program has evolved over the years from its beginnings as a collaborative program with the Indian Cancer Registries to one which today has an even broader public health focus on major health problems in low and middle income countries, says Pekka Nuorti, professor of epidemiology at the University of Tampere in Finland and the current director of the program. Nuorti was speaking to The Epidemiology Monitor about some of the key features of his highly competitive doctoral program which admits some 10-12 students every other year from approximately 100 applicants coming from different countries around the world.

The program is notable because it compresses all of the needed doctoral coursework in 10 months. Students are then free to return to their home countries or to stay in Finland to carry out their research projects. They must return to the campus to defend their dissertation.

Also, the program provides free tuition to all accepted students. They are responsible for travel costs and for accommodations while in Finland. However, the University has excellent housing for students, said Nuorti, and there is easy access to it for the students.

Public Health Focus

The public health practice focus for the program is related to Nuorti's own background in infectious disease epidemiology and in vaccination

programs. Several of the students in the program are graduates of Field Epidemiology Programs in various countries. Several of the courses offered reflect the public health focus such as ones on surveillance, infectious disease epidemiology, vaccines and vaccination programs, and program evaluation.

In order to graduate, students are expected to publish 4 papers on their work in an international peer-reviewed journal and to synthesize this work in their separate dissertation.

Current Program

Currently the program has some 35 active students. The program is designed to take new students only every other year, according to Nuorti, because the program is very intense for both students and faculty. After enrollment in the program, students have many opportunities to apply for doctoral research funding from a variety of sponsors in Finland, including a limited number of salaried research positions. This access to competitive research funding appears to be another notable feature of the Finnish program.

Deadlines

Applications for the program starting in September 2015 are due by February 25. According to Nuorti, students must at least submit their application by that date. If necessary, the other documents needed to complete the application can be *- Doctoral continues on page 6*

"The program is notable because it compresses all of the needed doctoral coursework in 10 months."

"...the program is very intense for both students and faculty."

Authors Confession

The main author is Khalid Khan, Professor of Women's Health and Clinical Epidemiology at the Centre for Primary Care and Public Health, Barts and The London School of Medicine. Co-author is Sameer Chaudhry. The authors in their acknowledgements thanked "potential dates who turned down one of us [Chaudhry] repeatedly, encouraging us to think about the effectiveness of online dating."

Methods

The researchers wanted to find out what approaches would maximise the chances of converting online contact between men and women into that all-important first face to face meeting, using published research on the art of attraction and persuasion. They therefore carried out an extensive search of relevant studies in the fields of psychology and sociology, as well as computer, behavioural, and neurocognitive sciences. Out of almost 4000 studies, 86 met their inclusion criteria.

Screen Name Advice

The study findings were pooled and synthesised to come up with a list of do's and don'ts for online dating, from creating a profile to making an approach. They found that the screen name chosen for an online profile is important. The lovelorn should avoid names with negative associations, such as 'Little' or 'Bug', and aim for something more playful, such as 'Fun2bwith' as this type of name is universally attractive.

And would-be daters should take gender into consideration: men are more drawn to names that indicate physical attractiveness, such as 'Blondie' or 'Cutie' while women go for names that signal intelligence, such as 'Cultured.'

But it may be even more important to start a screen name with a letter in the top half of the alphabet, say the researchers. That's because several measures of success, such as educational attainment and income are linked to names higher up the alphabet, added to which search engines sort names alphabetically. But choose carefully, say the researchers, who recommend looking at the profiles of other people you find attractive and using a similar screen name to theirs.

Good Photos

It goes without saying that an attractive photo is essential. But be sure to include one that features a genuine smile that crinkles up the eyes, and possibly a tilt of the head....And women seeking men should wear red as this is likely to boost the level of interest, the evidence shows.

And don't stop at selfies. Group photos showing other people having a good time in your company, preferably with you right in the middle of the action and touching someone else – but only on the upper arm – will help to convey, respectively, your friendliness, importance, and status. Incidentally, women find a man more attractive when they see other women smiling at him, say the researchers.

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"They found that the screen name chosen for an online profile is important."

"And women seeking men should wear red as this is likely to boost the level of interest..."

Neil Pearce Shares His Views On Conflicts Of Interest in Epidemiology

Concern about conflicts of interest in epidemiology has been heightened in the last year after the revelations last year that well-known epidemiologists in the field had failed to disclose some of their links to industry.

Compounding the concerns, criticisms of epidemiology by scientists with industry ties appear to have increased over the last 5-10 years, according to Neil Pearce of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine who has tracked these criticisms.

Alaska Symposium

Pearce was a featured speaker about ethics in epidemiology at the special symposium held last August in Alaska at the meeting of the International Epidemiological Association. It was triggered by the revelations earlier in the year.

Interviewed for another article about criticisms of IARC monographs in this issue, Pearce was asked how the attacks on IARC might be related to conflicts of interest in epidemiology.

Financial Conflicts of Interest

According to Pearce, everyone has a conflict of interest. Researchers want to be successful and this can lead them to make less than fully objective conclusions. However, he called conflicts of financial interest something different by an order of magnitude. He bemoaned the conflation of other types of conflicts with financial conflicts of interest. "Follow the money if you really want

to find the major conflicts of interest", he said.

'What has been striking about some of the recent ethical controversies in epidemiology (see the recent Epidemiology Monitor issue) is that when I have been contacted by journalists, they have said to me that "your colleagues are concerned about this and want to comment, but no-one wants to be named"', he said. 'There is a natural reluctance to be seen to be criticizing your colleagues, but this means that some fairly debatable practices are not being discussed'. In the recent Le Monde article (see Epidemiology Monitor...) only Neil Pearce and Paolo Vineis were prepared to be named, although others also expressed anonymous concerns.

Two Lessons

Pearce told the Monitor he learned two things from the workshop in Alaska. First, there is a whole range of views about this topic. Second, there is agreement that transparency and disclosure are fundamental, if not sufficient, to addressing the problem.

Open Payments System

The importance of disclosure was reinforced recently with the implementation of some of the sunshine provisions in the Affordable Care Act. This Act requires pharmaceutical, biological, and medical device manufacturers to
- Pearce continues on next page

"Follow the money if you really want to find the major conflicts of interest"

"...transparency and disclosure are fundamental..."

-Pearce continued from page 5

publicly report payments and other transfers of value made to physicians, dentists, and teaching hospitals each year. The provisions are being implemented by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the system created to receive and publish these disclosure reports is called the Open Payments system.

According to CMS, Open Payments 1) encourages transparency about these financial ties, 2) provides information on the nature and extent of the relationships, 3) helps to identify relationships that can both lead to the development of beneficial new technologies and wasteful health care spending, and 4) helps prevent inappropriate influence on research, education, and clinical decision making. It is possible that eventually this new program will also have a positive impact in addressing conflicts of interest in epidemiologic research.

Rewards For Ethics

For the present time, Pearce noted that the rules we have for addressing conflicts of interest are not working very well. He proposes that a better approach would be not only to demand full disclosure, but to go further than that and to reward scientists and/or institutions for ethical behavior. He called for a "Best ethical practice" award. "In the United Kingdom, institutions are ranked (bronze, silver, gold) according to their demonstrated 'commitment to advancing women's careers... in higher education and research" (<http://tinyurl.com/lubaxoa>) and this will ultimately be linked to funding'

he said. "Why can't we do the same for ethics, and reward good behavior rather than just having a list of things that we are not allowed to do?" He believes ranking institutions for acting ethically would bring about reform. 'Linking this to funding would certainly get their attention" he said.

ISEE Research Integrity

The International Society for Environmental Epidemiology already gives out a Research Integrity Award honoring those in environmental epidemiology who have demonstrated exceptional integrity in the face of pressure from special interests. This award is made periodically at the discretion of the ISEE Council and with the acceptance of the awardee. Steve Coughlin was the winner of the award in 2014 for his courage in revealing deficiencies in research at the Veterans Administration. While not quite the same as an award for ethical behavior, the award does reflect some of the same thinking as the Pearce suggestion. ■

"...the rules we have for addressing conflicts of interest are not working very well."

"Why can't we do the same for ethics, and reward good behavior rather than just having a list of things that we are not allowed to do?"

-Doctoral continued from page 3

submitted within the next week or two, but only if the initial deadline for an online application has been met. Students who are accepted in late April must decide by a deadline in May whether or not to accept the offer of admission.

In addition to the focus on infectious diseases, the Finnish program has strengths in the area of cancer, particularly epidemiology and screening, and in allergy, asthma, and diabetes.

For more information, visit www.uta.fi/ippe. Program email address is ippe@uta.fi ■

Headline Message

When it comes to the headline message, don't use complex language in the belief that it will make you look more intelligent. It won't. People are naturally drawn to words that are easy to remember and pronounce, and ease of information processing increases likeability, the analysis shows. "If you can get the potential date to stop and think about your headline message, increasing the exposure time to your primary photo, this will increase their liking [of you]," point out the researchers.

Don't Lie

And steer clear of fiction in your profile: apart from anything else, written information could come back to bite you, they warn. The evidence shows that it's best to provide a 70:30 ratio of who you are, and what you are looking for. And bear in mind that likeability is more attractive than academic achievement, and that a profile that appears genuine is more likely to generate interest.

Humor

What traits are most attractive? Men are drawn to physical fitness in women while women prefer bravery and risk-taking rather than kindness and altruism in men. When it comes to another helpful ingredient, humour, 'show; don't tell,' is the advice. A wittily written profile is likely to be far more successful than just saying that you have a sense of humour, say the researchers.

They go on to provide a list of helpful tips, which, the available evidence suggests, could boost the chances of getting a first date.

Once interest has been piqued:

Do personalize any email invitations to correspond online
Do make it short and sweet
Don't be afraid to use poetry, preferably rhyming with the potential date's headline

Once contact has been made:

Do ask open questions
Do respond promptly: eagerness is not a turn-off
Don't write screeds, but enough to indicate generosity with time
Do introduce humour
Do disclose some personal information
Don't sell yourself as a rare commodity that is worth having

If on a webcam:

Do smile
Do mimic body language
Don't slouch
Do pay genuine compliments, but don't flatter
Don't portray yourself as perfect: it arouses suspicion
Do end every conversation on a positive note/with a positive revelation about yourself And finally, don't leave it too long before arranging a face to face meeting.

To read the scholarly article in its entirety, visit:

<http://tinyurl.com/p74xa44> ■

"...that it's best to provide a 70:30 ratio of who you are, and what you are looking for."

"...women prefer bravery and risk-taking rather than kindness and altruism in men."

Below are recaps of news items where epidemiology or epidemiologists have been highlighted.

Epidemiologist Working On Ebola Describes “Emotional Toll”

It is easy for epidemiologists who understand disease transmission to grasp the low risk of contracting Ebola. It is more difficult for epidemiologists to imagine what the experience of actually battling Ebola on the front lines is like. In an account of an epidemiologist engaged in shoe-leather work in Sierra Leone, Australian epidemiologist [Jenn Duncombe](#) told *Doctors Without Borders*, “Work-wise, it was challenging but rewarding. But emotionally, it was very hard – a lot harder than I thought it would be.” She recalled one heartbreaking story of a 17 year old girl who lost 21 members of her family and was now the sole caretaker of two younger sisters.

According to the article “there is an enormity to this crisis and a pull that only those who have experienced it seem to truly understand. Despite this, Duncombe told the media she is ready to return.

MMWR Report Suggests Neurologic Illness In Indian Children May Be Related To Exposure To Litchi Fruit

An annual outbreak of serious neurologic illness in children with a fatality rate of 44% starting in June and ending with the onset of monsoon rains may be linked to exposure to a toxin in litchi fruit, according to a report in CDC’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (January 30, 2015). The district in India where the cases occur is a litchi-fruit producing region. According to CDC, although a specific etiology has not yet been determined, the recent investigation has identified the illness as a hypoglycemic encephalopathy. No evidence for an infectious

etiology has been found but a compound found in litchi seeds has been shown to cause hypoglycemia in animal studies. The usefulness of the latest investigations is in pointing out the value of treating children as quickly as possible for hypoglycemia. Outbreaks of similar illnesses have been reported in litchi growing areas of Bangladesh and Vietnam. Also, a toxin which has been reported to cause acute hypoglycemia in the West Indies and West Africa is present in unripe ackee, a fruit in the same botanical family as litchi. One unexplained feature of the outbreaks so far is a lack of clustering of cases.

5 Easy Steps To Creating An Epidemic

Trying to get clicks for his story on the Internet by creating a list, [Paul Marantz](#), a blogger and epidemiologist at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, has succeeded in doing so while expressing his views about the current measles outbreak. He called the outbreak “a direct and predictable” result of many social/political trends and offered the following tongue in cheek formula for creating an epidemic.

1. Raise a generation ignorant about science
2. Allow belief (religious or otherwise) to rule the day
3. Let distrust of government over-ride good judgment
4. Put our faith in quacks and nudniks who share our worldviews
5. Value personal liberty at the expense of public health

-Epi News Briefs continues on next page

Reform Being Proposed For The World Health Organization In Wake Of Inadequate Ebola Response

Director Calls For More Epidemiologists

Speaking at a recent board meeting of the WHO in late January, WHO Director Margaret Chan had some frank assessments to share and some important proposed remedies. According to Chan, one of the biggest lessons the world learned last year is that “ well-functioning health systems are not a luxury. Well-functioning health systems are the cushion that keeps sudden shocks from reverberating throughout the fabric that holds societies together, ripping them apart. As we learned control depends on community engagement and community leadership at every stage.”

Of particular interest to epidemiologists, Chan said “WHO needs to strengthen its own workforce. Outbreak detection and response benefit greatly from the experience and knowledge of senior field epidemiologists. We need more of them.”

She concluded her remarks by urging “all of us to turn the 2014 Ebola crisis into an opportunity to build a build a stronger system to defend our collective global health security.”



Epidemiology Saying

We recently encountered this saying on the Internet

I am an epidemiologist.

To save time, let’s just assume that I am never wrong.



Call Goes Out For French Speaking Epidemiologists For Work In Africa

A call for epidemiologists to volunteer in the fight against Ebola in Guinea has been issued by the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

ECDC has been mobilizing and coordinating field epidemiology teams in Guinea to provide technical support and leadership for case detection, contact tracing and monitoring, collection and analysis of descriptive epidemiology, quality assurance and training of national staff.

The ECDC is looking for experienced experts for periods of six weeks until the end of June 2015. In further describing the work, the ECDC states “Staff who deploy in the ECDC contingent are formally employed by WHO as short term consultants and covered by the WHO insurance system. The WHO covers travel costs and per diem, and pays a token salary. The ECDC contributes to the preparation of experts who deploy and provides back-up for the teams in the field.”

Link to the article:

<http://tinyurl.com/pvd5tgv>

For more information, contact Niklas Danielsson via email:

niklas.danielsson@ecdc.europa.eu

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New Contest

Advice From An Epidemiologist

We recently ran across samples of advice on how to live your life from different animals and other parts of the natural world published by the Earth, Sun, and Moon trading company. (See sample sayings below). These sayings inspired us to create our next contest.

Submit the most clever double-entendre pieces of advice from an epidemiologist's perspective and win a \$300 prize. Keep your pieces of advice short. Second and third place winners will also be rewarded.

Here is the advice that inspired us. See if you can do better on behalf of epidemiologists! Deadline for submission is May 15. If duplicate entries are received, the prize will be awarded to the earliest submissions. We reserve the right to make the final decision. All submitted entries become the property of The Epidemiology Monitor.

Send your entries to epimon@aol.com

Advice From a Tree

- Stand tall and proud
- Sink roots into the earth
- Be content with your natural beauty
- Go out on a limb
- Drink plenty of water
- Remember your roots
- Enjoy the view

Advice From a Snowman

- Be a jolly, happy soul
- Spend time outdoors
- Stay cool
- It's ok to be a little bottom-heavy
- Avoid melt-downs
- Be well-rounded
- Live well, life is short

Advice From a Spider

- Make good connections
- Be web-savvy
- Patience pays off
- Let go of your hang ups
- Show your artistic side
- Dew your best
- Don't get strung out

"...win a \$300 prize..."

"See if you can do better on behalf of epidemiologists!"

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**The Columbia Psychiatric-Neurological
Epidemiology Early Investigator Award
Open to Submissions**

The Columbia University Psychiatric-Neurological Epidemiology Early Investigator Award recognizes excellence in the areas of psychiatric and/or neurological epidemiology by an individual at the Instructor or Assistant Professor level or the equivalent.

Nominees may be at any institution. Nominations may be made by investigators at any institution. Nominations are due April 1, 2015. The awardee will be notified on May 1, 2015.

Faculty members in the Psychiatric-Neurological Epidemiology Cluster will comprise a selection committee.

Nominations should include two documents: a letter addressed to Dr. Karestan Koenen, Cluster Leader, summarizing the major achievements of the nominee (maximum 1 page long), and the nominee's curriculum vitae. Please ensure that current contact information, including email addresses, for both the nominator and the nominee is contained in the letter to Dr. Koenen. Send information as a Word document or pdf attachment via email to Dr. Koenen at kck5@cumc.columbia.edu.

The awardee will be honored at a special colloquium sponsored by the Department of Epidemiology at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. The award includes travel expenses, a \$400 honorarium, and a plaque. The awardee will be asked to give a talk as part of the Psychiatric-Neurological Epidemiology Cluster seminar series.



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PROFESSOR AND DIVISION HEAD DIVISION OF EPIDEMIOLOGY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The University of Minnesota's School of Public Health (SPH) is seeking a tenured Professor and Head for the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health (EpiCH) to provide strategic and academic leadership for the Division's 52 primary faculty, more than 300 graduate students, 400 staff, and approximately \$25 million annually in sponsored projects research on the etiology and prevention of disease. Visit <http://sph.umn.edu/epi> for more information on the Division.

Reporting to the Dean of the School of Public Health, the Professor and Head will:

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- be responsible for advancing and participating in the Division's diverse spectrum of interdisciplinary research, teaching, and service by leveraging and expanding the Division's, School's, and University's strengths;
- support collaborative activities that cut across the University and community;
- recruit and retain excellent faculty, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, and encourage their development with strong and effective mentorship;
- foster a learning environment that attracts a diverse student body;
- strengthen collegial and collaborative culture that is inclusive, diverse, supportive, and values strong faculty governance; and
- maintain an active scholarship portfolio including external funding and peer-reviewed publications.

Candidates must have a Ph.D., Sc.D., M.D., or equivalent degree in a health-related field and credentials commensurate with appointment as a tenured full professor in the SPH. Candidates are expected to have a nationally/internationally recognized record of research and scholarship, including external funding; demonstrated excellence in graduate program teaching; and documented experience in mentorship, leadership and management in a large diverse academic institution. Applications will be reviewed beginning March 15, 2015, and the position will be open until filled. To apply for the position, please submit a cover letter, CV including publications list, and a list of at least three referees on-line using the following link: <http://employment.umn.edu/applicants/Central?quickFind=126753>. Reference requisition number 196055. Salary will be competitive and commensurate with qualifications and background.



Residential Summer Course in Epidemiology, Florence, 22 June – 10 July 2015

Contact: eepe@eepe.org and <http://www.eepe.org>

The course, now in its 28th year, is intended for epidemiologists, statisticians, clinicians and public health practitioners with an interest in epidemiology. The course offers in the first two weeks five general modules on epidemiological study design and statistical analysis of epidemiological data, and in the third week seven special modules on topics of current relevance for health and advanced methodological issues. The course is taught in English by lecturers mostly from European universities and research institutes and is held in residential form in the "Studium" centre on the hills of Florence.

Week 1, 22 June – 26 June 2015

- Epidemiological methods I : Basic principles and introduction to study design. *Neil Pearce, Lorenzo Richiardi, Franco Merletti*
- Statistical methods in epidemiology I: Basic principles. *Simon Cousens and Costanza Pizzi*

Week 2, 31 June – 3 July 2015

- Epidemiological methods II: Case-control studies. *Jørn Olsen, Manolis Kogevinas*
- Statistical methods in epidemiology II: Analysis of cross-sectional and case-control studies. *Cono Ariti, Aurelio Tobias*
- Computer analysis of epidemiological data sets. *Manolis Kogevinas, Stefano Mattioli, Aurelio Tobias, Stefania Curti, Chunsen Wu, Jørn Olsen*

Week 3, Special Modules 6 July – 10 July 2015

- Advanced statistical topics. *Per Kragh Andersen, with Annibale Biggeri, Corrado Lagazio and Michaela Baccini*
- Key and advanced concepts in epidemiology. *Jan Vandenbroucke*
- Environmental epidemiology. *Josep M. Antó and Jordi Sunyer*
- Clinical Epidemiology. *Patrick Bossuyt*
- Fertility and Pregnancy: an epidemiologic perspective. *Debbie Lawlor*
- Concepts and methods in causal mediation analysis. *Bianca DeStavola*
- From personalized to global public health. *Nicole Probst-Hensch and Nino Künzli*

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