



Epidemiologist-Judges For The Young Epidemiology Scholars Program Continue To Laud The Program and Its Participants

The Young Epidemiology Scholars Program announced the winners of this year's competition in April 2011 (see Epi Monitor April, 2011). Several of the judges were contacted by The Epi Monitor to ask for their assessments of the program, now entering its 9th year of operation. Below are excerpts of the comments we received from West Virginia University's Ian Rockett, the University of California Berkeley's Lee Riley, the University of Southern California's Jonathan Samet, the University of Puerto Rico's Jose Cordero, and the CDC's Ralph Cordell and Denise Koo.

Ian Rockett

"The 2010-11 YES Competition was imbued with all of the anticipation and excitement of prior competitions. Believe me, the judges were also infected as always.

To be expected, many students researched topics from their everyday lives, such as the health effects of texting, consuming energy drinks, skipping meals, cheerleading, and smoking hookah. "One of the two top student winners literally exemplified shoe-leather epidemiology by investigating the relative injury risks associated with running barefoot versus in shoes and transitioning between the two."

Illustrating the hazards of epidemiologic prediction, I do continue to be surprised with the paucity of case-control studies. This research design would seem to lend itself nicely to a seriously time-constrained project, while presenting students with numerous and rich opportunities. That said, there is no question that the general degree of sophistication of projects has increased markedly since the inception of YES in 2004. The best projects were always excellent, but now there is a far greater depth of high-quality ones. Among markers for this transformation are proportionally more publishable papers and student affiliations with universities and other research institutions, including NIH. The presenters are also reflecting ever greater poise and self-assurance in their presentations."

Successes of past students speaks volumes about the quality of the competitors."

Lee Riley

"My feeling is that this program really needs to be continued. It has finally reached a stage where the impact of the program is just beginning to be felt and it will be a shame for this impact to be abruptly interrupted. Because of this program, there are many college and post-graduate students who are beginning to launch a career in epidemiology and public health. This was one of the goals of the YES program--to fill a gap in the US of professionals trained in epidemiology to address many of our nation's health problems at the population level. The program has clearly shown that it can do this by the approach it has developed. The Intel Science Fair program encourages high school students to enter a career in science and it has been highly successful. In fact, it's programs like this that keep the US ahead in innovation in science. YES can do the same with epidemiology."

Jonathan Samet

"I have been a judge from the outset and have returned every year because of the very interesting work done by the participants. Every year, there are a few remarkably creative projects and the participants are already on very productive trajectories. Perhaps the major failing of the program is that the participants, not surprisingly, come from leading high schools with motivated teachers. It would be great if there were a more diverse pipeline of participating schools, a goal shared by RWJ, I suspect."



Jose Cordero

Being a judge at the YES competition gives me great hope for the future of public health in America. Seeing so many talented young students learning what epidemiology and public health can do to improve the lives of people is heart warming.

Even better that many are choosing a career in public health. It is the best sign that this is a very important program for the Nation. We need programs like YES that inspire high school students to see the public health challenges in their community, generate key questions, seek advice, and conduct studies to answer their questions. In the process, they may find new answers to the problems we face and discover what a career in public health can be.

One example is a Scholar who was concerned with the suicides and suicide attempts in her high school. She designed a study to find out the risk factors and in the process discovered a new way students were harming themselves that required a new approach to be addressed and prevented.

YES is unleashing the imagination of our young students in America and bringing them into the realm of epidemiology and public health.

Ralph Cordell

“YES brings epidemiology to the forefront of math and science education, providing students the opportunity to learn the skills epidemiologists utilize in public health. Those of us at CDC who have participated as YES judges are glad to contribute to the success of the program. Bringing the YES winners to CDC allows us to introduce these young people to CDC and encourage them to consider public health as a career opportunity.”

Denise Koo

I have enjoyed being a YES judge each year for the past 8 years. Over that time, I have been delighted to find the focus of YES finalists increasingly centered on health issues relevant to their age group. These presentations provide a window into the issues important to them personally, and unsurprisingly, have been the most compelling. And the poise with which they answer questions from us judges is astounding.

YES has had a long lasting impact on the competitors; now they have been deliberately introduced to the excitement of epidemiology and public health, and many of them are choosing public health as a career. Today's generations are interested in doing good and making a difference, and they find that this field fulfills such interests. This is so exciting to introduce them early to public health, given that so many of our generation found public health only by chance at later stages of our careers.

What has most impressed me are the YES winners who have gone beyond the contest to ensure implementation of their findings. Several have kept in touch with me with questions about public health careers or ideas for how they could get internships.