



McMaster's Stephen Walter Selected To Write Essays About Epidemiology For The General Public

The People's Epidemiology Library (PEL) has selected Stephen Walter, professor in the Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at McMaster University in Hamilton Ontario Canada, as the winner of its essay contest to write short essays explaining to a wider public the main topics of epidemiology methods and concepts. Walter beat out other entrants in the contest on the basis of his credentials and experience in epidemiology, a brief outline conveying the general approach he would take in writing the essays, and a sample of his writing style.

Other Applicants

Other applicants included a faculty member from Saint Louis University School of Public Health, a medical doctor with a PhD in epidemiology working at NIH, an assistant scientist from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and an assistant professor in the University of Minnesota School of Medicine.

The Prize

The prize for winning the contest is \$4,000 to cover travel expenses to the IEA World Congress of Epidemiology in Edinburgh Scotland in August 2011. Sponsors of the PEL expect to officially launch the Library website at that meeting and to publish a first draft of the essays at that time (see related interview in this issue).

We contacted Walter to ask him his thoughts about the contest and his plans for writing the essays. Here is what he told the Epidemiology Monitor:

How did it make you feel to learn you were selected to write the essays?

I was surprised and delighted to hear that I had won. Because this is the first competition of its type that I had heard of, I had no idea of the level or amount of competition that might be out there. By coincidence, I did my graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh, so being able to re-visit one of my favourite cities was an added bonus.

What motivated you to want to do this in the first place?

I saw the announcement in the Epidemiology Monitor, and was attracted by the idea of writing about Epidemiology for the general public. This is an area that many of us in academic epidemiology do not often do, but I think it is a very important thing to pursue.

What made you think you might be good at doing this?

I have worked in various domains of epidemiology during my career, including risk factor etiology, public health, and, more recently, clinical epidemiology. I thought that experience would give me a broad base to comment on our discipline.

As part of the competition process, applicants were asked to provide an example of their writing aimed at a general audience. I happen to be a member of a local symphony orchestra, and I write the concert program notes for it. The audience members reading those notes range considerably, from people who know the music in great detail, to people who have never heard of it before. I included an extract of my program notes from a recent concert as my example for the competition.



What feature do you think stands out in the approach you will use to complete the essays?

The challenge in writing the essays will be to be selective from the huge range of topics that might come under discussion, but at the same time make the essays accessible to readers with a wide variety of backgrounds. I will try to avoid technical jargon as much as possible, and make the text accessible to the lay reader. I will also try to convey my enthusiasm for the discipline, and to indicate why epidemiology is so important in contemporary society.