

Rebuttal?

410 Groveland Ave. 802
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Dr. Henry Blackburn and our Colleagues
in the Seven Countries Study

Dear Colleagues,

Some serious questions have arisen about the use of the data in the Seven Countries Study. Let us review what I think is commonly agreed to be the normal sequence of steps in any scientific study.

First there is a question of concern for which attempts should be made to find an answer. Then comes an idea about how to look for the answer. To implement the idea decisions are made about what to do and how to do it.

Those decisions lead to practicalities; what methods should be used, where to do the work, what equipment and subjects will be needed for the study. Then comes the need to acquire funds to cover anticipated costs and to enlist participants as colleagues and assistants.

The methods should be tested and standardized before the real work begins. Commonly, the early experience in the study calls for modification of the methods and then the study is on its way with a standardized procedure.

When enough data have been collected the idea is tested with suitable statistical analyses. Then the findings are reported by those who made the study and compared with other relevant reports and ideas on the question that the study attempted to answer.

Now I return to the original point, questions about the Seven Countries Study. The data acquired by the workers in the study are reported to Alessandro Menotti to put them all in the same form with standardized methods for the attribution of cause of disease and death. With everything in standard form the data are put on tape and a copy of that tape is sent to the Division of Epidemiology of the University of Minnesota.

Now questions arise about the use of those data. The colleagues have examined this question in several meetings. There have been no specific agreements on details of who is to do what and when with the data but there is common agreement that the colleagues should inform the group about what, in the absence of objection, they would propose to do in specific areas of analyzing and reporting the results. In personal particular I told the colleagues I'd like to concentrate on body fatness and related measures in regard to longevity and there was no objection. I began to examine and publish on that question over twenty years ago.

Access to the data file on the Seven Countries Study has not been restricted as would be the case in industry and often in university departments. We have relied on common honor and decency to assure that the data would not be stolen and published by persons who had nothing to do with acquiring the data. But that seems to have been a mistake.

The problem is that some persons think the Seven Countries data are public property, free to be used and published by anyone who can get at the data. Today I learn of the acceptance for publication by a journal of a manuscript written by authors who had nothing whatever to do with collecting the data or the research studies that produced them. The authors are Yao C-H, Slatterly ML, Jacobs DR Jr, Folsom AR, Nelson ET. The ms. is entitled "Anthropometric Predictors of Coronary Heart Disease and Total Morality: Findings from the U.S. Railroad Study."

The subject of the manuscript is what I have been working on for years, a subject that our colleagues in the Seven Countries Study agreed as being suitable for my concentration in the Seven Countries Study. For the study on the U.S. railroad I personally checked the data files, persuaded and paid the U.S. Railroad Retirement Board to determine the vital status of the men 30 years after entry, getting official death certificates, and sending the data to be filed here.i

I have a copy of the manuscript never heard of by me before; it is a good report based on stolen data.

I had just given Henry Blackburn my final manuscript on the same subject, revised two years after the first version, and have been waiting for his approval to send it to a journal. The authors are Keys A, Taylor HL, Blackburn H, and Brozek J. The ms entitled "Longevity and Body Fatness in Middle Age, reports the data and their analysis from the study on the U.S. rsilroad men covering the thirty years experience. Henry does not yet know of this last development. I suppose our manuscript can be put in a file labelled Bitter Experiences as a reminder to beware of thieves.

So you are warned; your data are not burglar proof.

Ever yours,

Ancel Keys