Failure to identify association between deprivation and incidence of lung cancer surprising

Battersby et al present a method of performing equity audit where data on incidence, deprivation, and surgical resection rates of non-small cell lung cancer are compared. Deprivation was measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2000 and all analyses were performed at the primary care trust (PCT) level. Battersby et al report no statistically significant associations between their measure of deprivation and age and sex standardised incidence of non-small cell lung cancer. This is highly unusual and in contrast with findings from a large number of different populations. Without clear evidence that there is something exceptional about the population studied by Battersby et al, the lack of association between deprivation and incidence of lung cancer is likely to be an artefact.

Two possible explanations of Battersby et al’s failure to find an association between deprivation and incidence of lung cancer are possible. Firstly, calculating deprivation at the PCT level may be highly inaccurate. The IMD is a ward level variable and the PCT level may be highly inaccurate. The possible. Firstly, calculating deprivation at the PCT level is inaccurate. Secondly, with other data points, it is probable that Battersby et al’s study lacks sufficient power to detect any but the strongest of associations.

Although the focus of Battersby et al’s article is primarily on a methodological technique, rather than on the particulars of the example data used, the failure to detect an association between deprivation and incidence of lung cancer suggests some problem with this technique. Furthermore, presentation of these results to non-specialised audiences, as is intended, may give the impression that deprivation is not an important determinant of incidence of lung cancer—which the majority of other evidence suggests it is.

Although public health practice requires methods that are quick, easy, and cheap to perform, this should not be at the expense of accuracy to such a degree that important, strong, and known associations are overlooked.

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Authors’ reply

Dr Adams is correct in her assertion that the lack of statistically significant association between the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000 (IMD 2000) score and the incidence of non-small cell lung cancer is unusual. However, we would dispute the suggestion that calculating deprivation at primary care trust (PCT) level is inaccurate.

We suggest that the use of population weighted average scores is an appropriate method of calculating PCT deprivation scores. The IMD is a proportion and, therefore, the construction of an IMD score for aggregated populations requires population weighting. This is an accepted methodology and is widely applied.

We did report that crude incidence of non-small lung cancer correlated with the IMD 2000 score. Moreover, when looking at mortality from all lung cancers during a similar period, there was good correlation between IMD 2000 score and age specific death rates for lung cancer, both for men r = 0.76 (95% CI 0.44 to 0.91), and women r = 0.59 (95% CI 0.13 to 0.83). It was only the relation between IMD 2000 score and the age-sex standardised incidence of non-small cell lung cancer that, although present, did not reach statistical significance.

It seems more probable that this lack of statistically significant association can be explained by the fact that the range of deprivation scores across PCTs in the east of England is comparatively narrow. IMD 2000 population weighted average scores vary from 7.1 to 38.0 across PCTs in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire. This compares with a much wider range of 4.4 to 61.3 across local authorities in England. A further weakening of the association may also be attributable to the exclusion of small cell lung cancers (about 13% of all lung cancers), which are almost exclusively attributable to smoking. However, this effect is likely to be small.

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References


Bidirectional associations between depression/anxiety and bowel disease in a population based cohort

Kurina and colleagues reported that neurotic disorders preceded inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), adding credence to the suggestion that depression/anxiety may either play an aetiological part in the onset of IBD or that both conditions share a common abnormality. As their findings were based on record linkage of people with neurotic disorder who received treatment in mental health services representing only a small minority of such cases, replication independent of mental health service treatment setting is necessary to exclude the well known bias attributable to selection of the most severely ill with the highest comorbidity rates. This analysis is a part of the Netherlands mental health survey and incidence study.
work showing that IBD is associated with familial transmission of an endophenotype characterised by subclinical inflammation that may predispose to no only IBD, but also to depression."

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BOOK REVIEW

Cannabis use and dependence: public health and public policy

Written by two scholars with outstanding reputations in the drugs field, this book assessed current knowledge on very controversial topics: the health, psychological, and social effects of cannabis use and misuse; the effectiveness and costs of cannabis prohibition, and policy alternatives. Well written and well organised, with chapter summaries and a final topic by topic summing up, this book is probably the most comprehensive and honest attempt to improve the quality of public policy debate on cannabis.

The most comprehensive, because the authors address the whole range of relevant issues, including some that remain “taboo” in several developed countries: they compare the health effects of cannabis with alcohol and tobacco; they investigate the possible benefits of cannabis use; they scrutinise the necessary conditions to implement the legalisation of cannabis... Then “drug warriors” should be interested in reading about topics they usually refuse to discuss. For example, the authors showed very convincingly that in a legal market the government should regulate the quality, potency, price, and bulk of cannabis that is sold to consumers, so the removal of criminal sanctions for sale and possession of cannabis would not eliminate the costs of enforcing cannabis laws.

The most honest, because unlike propagandists from both sides and other self proclaimed “experts” who are prompt to express great certainty about studies flawed by methodological shortcomings, the authors admit that many results remain uncertain and controversial, and they identify promising avenues for future research. With regard to honesty, they also mention the frequent dishonest and selective citation of evidence to honesty, they also mention the frequent dishonest and selective citation of evidence on the health effects of cannabis that blurs the public debate and distorts health education among the youth. Last but not least, they remind us that beyond scientific evidence deciding which policy to adopt remains a moral issue depending on which social values we defend.

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