Foreword

In many European countries there is a considerable lack of usable health related data from the ambulatory care sector. Thus, primary health care research – that is, contact based epidemiology of ambulatory care – has been of increasing importance for the past decade. Through continuing health care research, the frequency and distribution of health problems which either have not yet or never will have to be dealt with by the hospital sector can be monitored.

Sentinel practice networks have become an important epidemiological instrument for morbidity surveillance in many countries of the western world. In these networks, practice based physicians cooperate on a (mostly) non-monetary basis in monitoring defined events among their patients (for example, influenza, mumps, asthma attacks) in a standardised way. Sentinel systems can also be used as an approach to the various types of epidemiological studies in the population served. The unique contribution of these networks is the ability to obtain data on health related events continuously and directly from the ambulatory health care system. After adequate analysis, these data may indicate spatial and temporal trends in the frequency and distribution of defined health events and give information on patient management, or aetiological hypotheses can be generated or tested. Nevertheless, many methodological problems inherent in this approach have to be solved in order to obtain valid information from sentinel systems. Some of these obstacles are intrinsic to the health care system itself, others are specific to contact based epidemiology by means of sentinel practice networks.

The *2nd Hannover Sentinel Workshop* was held from 4th to 5th March 1994, in Hannover, Germany. The purpose of this meeting was to bring together scientists from European countries who apply sentinel systems in epidemiological

research, to discuss methods, problems, and solutions as well as results of sentinel research, and to present the opportunity for information exchange at a personal level. More than 40 participants from Austria, Germany, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain, and Switzerland attended the workshop, and 16 oral presentations on methodological approaches and results were made.

The proceedings of the *1st Hannover Sentinel Workshop*, which was held in April 1992, have been published in a supplement to the journal *Das Gesundheitswesen*. The *3rd Hannover Sentinel Workshop* is scheduled for March 1996. Publication of this supplement was sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, and the editors wish to acknowledge the ministry's generous support.

This supplement comprises most of the workshop contributions in a revised edition in order to meet the requirements of scientific articles. Written proceedings, however, cannot hope to convey the actual spirit of scientific and personal exchange at an international meeting. For those who were unable to attend, this supplement not only presents a good overview of the workshop presentations, but also a cross section of current activities and a preview of future developments in the field of practice based epidemiology.

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