It is true that these have been a recurrent, and clearly as yet unresolved, point of debate at the meetings of the REVES network, but in the peer reviewed international literature the problem has only been mentioned, albeit insufficiently and not quite correctly explained by Petridou and Ritchie. Other researchers apparently prefer to ignore it. In a comprehensive overview of the Dutch population health status, aimed squarely at policy makers, an interesting section, written by Van de Water, Boshuiten, and Perenboom, is devoted to health expectancy and its trends in The Netherlands. Although the trend analysis is based on the Sullivan method, no mention is made that there might be a problem with the results. This can hardly be considered as giving the full story to policy makers.

And lastly, "pooh-poohing" the problems of health expectancy trend estimation from cross sectional data is a self defeating strategy. What policy maker worth his salt is going to endorse the larges chunk of taxpayers' money needed for longitudinal studies when his researchers tell you cheap cross sectional data will do fine? If the policy makers take the word of Van de Water et al for it, we will never be able to find out how wrong we are.

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Socioeconomic factors and injuries

Sir – The conclusions stated in the article by Petridou et al seem a little confusing. Their multiple logistic regression-derived odds ratio estimate for paternal schooling is 0.66 (95% CI = 0.44, 0.99). It is then concluded that low socioeconomic status (SES), as reflected by paternal education, increases the risk for school related injuries. An odds ratio of less than 1, however, suggests there is a protective effect against school injuries for paternal schooling. Unfortunately, since the authors did not provide sufficient information on how paternal education was defined in this study, their conclusion seems to contradict their data. It is likely that the authors’ data reflect a protective effect against injuries for some degree of paternal schooling, but the reader is left to infer just what this may be.

These results, along with their reported significance for school injuries to children from single parent homes, are contradictory to our case-control study of Ghanaian childhood burns and our prospective study of the incidence and determinants of all cause injury in adolescents in the United States. 1 There are other examples of discrepancies in the literature for both SES as an injury risk factor and in the reporting of the incidence of injury in developing and developed countries. 2 Comparisons of injury data are most often impeded by two factors: a lack of a consistent case or attribute definition and variations in case ascertainment rate. We have been advocating the use of standardised terminology in injury research including demographic descriptors to permit valid comparisons of injury research. With the growing interest in risk factors for injuries in childhood and adolescence, including school injuries, it is important to present concise and thorough information as a guide to researchers so that comparisons can be made across studies.

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Reply

Sir – We appreciate the interest of Drs Forjuoh and Dearwater on our paper, 1 but are mystified by their concern over our results concerning socioeconomic class as reflected in paternal education. Our data show that an increased paternal schooling by 3 years, that is higher socioeconomic status, is associated with significantly reduced risk for school injuries by 34% (odds ratio 0.66; 95% confidence interval 0.44-0.99). Obviously, lower socioeconomic status increases this risk, which is exactly what we reported. We find it hard to further simplify the expression "3 more years of paternal schooling".

We agree with Forjuoh and Dearwater that there are discrepancies in the literature concerning risk factors for childhood injuries but editorial policies of the Journal with respect to short reports did not allow us to expand on this issue. We also agree with Forjuoh and Dearwater that standardised terminology is needed in this as in any other field. Whether their approach, ours, or that of another group should be the basis of an eventual consensus cannot be ascertained at the present time.

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