

International comparison of health determinants

SPM starts in this issue a new Section dedicated to international comparisons of health determinants. The need for such a Section stems from a simple observation. There is a wealth of locally-based research in the fields of surveys, risk factor surveillance and health promotion. This research generates large quantity of information, which is essentially non available in the literature, or, when available, difficult to compare or to interpret. This situation is due in part to lack of experience in the international comparison of health determinants and also to the lack of scientific journals dedicated to these issues.

Publication of locally-based surveys acquire a different meaning if the published results become comparable with similar data collected in other populations. We therefore propose a series of guidelines for future papers to be submitted to SPM.

Careful description of the methodology is a first requirement for the interpretation of survey research, risk factor surveillance and health promotion data. Such requirement in a peer-reviewed journal is certainly not surprising. Our second suggestion may be a little bit more surprising to the reader: papers submitted to this Section should adopt a standardised format. Data presented in a similar format will be more comparable. The need for standardisation and benefits of harmonisation are rather obvious: when basic categories such as age groups, cut-offs for continuous variables are dissimilar, data are hardly comparable across population. The same is true when the statistics used to present the data differ. Some will present medians or other percentiles, other means and SD.

*The Sections' requirements are set up to develop new forms of harmonised reporting. Guidelines for submitting papers to the Section are likely to evolve with time. As a starting point, we have devised the following **Instructions for authors**: "Distribution of health determinants are presented in an Appendix, stratified by gender and 5-year age groups,*

starting with 0–4, 5–9, etc. For each gender and age specific categories, present the percentiles 10, 50, 90, the mean and the SD. See Bernstein MS et al., SPM 2000; 46: 49–59 for a model. Submitted papers should presents a detailed description of the survey design and the measurement methods. Results focus on the most salient observations beyond the descriptive statistics included in the Appendix. Percentiles are shown, when relevant, with their confidence intervals. If data on similar variables have been published in the literature, and specifically as contributions to this section of SPM, use the corresponding appendix as a source of comparison and discussion."

We hope that this section of SPM will generate the substrate necessary to newly elaborate and improve the main technical, conceptual and methodological tools for international comparison of health determinants. By making the appendices available on the future web site of SPM, we will also progressively built a database, available for researchers and candidate authors.

Alfredo Morabia and Thomas Abel