

## Editorial

### Editorial choices: To expand or not to expand . . .

In this issue of the journal, Schubert and Rougemont<sup>1</sup> provide us with the nice opportunity to have a systematic look back at the research published in *Social and Preventive Medicine* during the past decade. The interesting contribution of these two authors – which is the first one of this genre ever published in our journal – invites several comments.

Research into publication of scientific evidence is a relatively young discipline. Nevertheless, it is an important one given the role that scientific journals play in our daily life as researchers. Reading, and sometimes publishing, articles may not be the fastest way of communication within the scientific peer group, but it is certainly the most fundamental and thorough one. When an attempt to conduct “research into research” is undertaken, the reason is of course not a narcissistic wish to look for traces of the own professional efforts in the literature but to give an empirically based overview on past and current published work, its main research areas, important methodologies and study designs, author affiliations, among many others. It is plain that important insights into the mechanisms of publication, and of research in the broadest sense of the term, can be obtained from such articles.

First of all, it is remarkable that these two French speaking authors present their work in English. By doing so, Schubert and Rougemont are perfectly in line with their own observation of a rapidly increasing proportion of English articles in the journal, from none in 1980 to one quarter in 1990 (and even more than one half in 1991). We feel that a rising number of English articles is a prerequisite to come closer to the goal of a more international readership. A second important observation is that the heavily Swiss authorship of articles has diminished towards the end of the decade, with a greater proportion of German or other non-Swiss authors. The same trend is true for the regions concerned with the articles published in *Soz Präventivmed*: Switzerland becomes less prominent, while more space is devoted to Germany and, with slower progression, to other European and non-European countries. This development, too, is very welcome for a journal that strives to leave, at least in part, its strictly national pattern behind. Third, Schubert and Rougemont note that the length of published articles has increased, especially during the last three years. While there may be a general trend towards longer papers in all journals – including longer titles and a greater number of authors – in the case of *Soz Präventivmed* the change in editorial

policy in 1987 not to accept any longer unreviewed 2-page-articles may be one important additional reason. Fourth, and possibly most important, Schubert and Rougemont note a nearly threefold increase between 1980 and 1990 in the proportion of “epidemiological studies” among all original articles (i.e. papers presenting original data). According to the rigorous definition used, only “population-based studies on a random sample, with the results expressed in rates, indicating a well-defined denominator”, were termed “epidemiological” ones. Even though it is regrettable that only very few of these epidemiological studies were of the case control or cohort type, the relative increase in studies with a population based epidemiological design is good news.

However, the paper of Schubert and Rougemont cannot deal with “all” historically important and often difficult editorial decisions that had to be taken during the past decade and which have influenced the appearance and characteristics of our journal. For example, a major change in editorial policy during the early 80ies was to drop the system of single *Soz Präventivmed* issues devoted to a specific topic (when a guest editor invited some authors to write an article) in favour of an open system with much more free communications. It shall also be added that the adoption of a peer review system has led to the rejection of a certain number of articles submitted, with this proportion reaching nearly 30% in recent years. Or in the years 1983, 1984 and 1985, authors were urged to provide directly reproducible manuscripts, in order to reduce production costs. This had the effect that the text published per page was longer on average than with the conventional system of typesetting by the publisher. Obviously, such constraints must be kept in mind when the variable “average length of articles” is considered in the paper of Schubert and Rougemont. Finally it is interesting to see that Schubert and Rougemont at the end of the analysis come to the conclusion that publication of short articles with robust results that may not be published elsewhere should be favoured by the editors – ironically, the system of short two-page articles for contributors to the annual scientific meeting of the Swiss Society for Social and Preventive Medicine was abandoned in 1988 in order not to “force” authors to publish results in our journal that also could have been published elsewhere . . .

Every editorial decision has its own advantages and disadvantages. Only a precise knowledge of the preferences of the readership would enable *Soz*

Präventivmed to “tailor” more exactly the contents of the journal to the needs of its readership. In the absence of such knowledge, we feel that papers like the one of Schubert and Rougemont – and possibly readers’ reaction to it – may help us to better identify the relevant avenues of research in our discipline and to better target the demands for information of our readership.

Nevertheless, it is one of our hopes that a rising proportion of original articles written in English that are based on a decent epidemiological study design and that present findings of European relevance will further enhance the scientific quality of *Soz Präventivmed* and thus make our journal an

increasingly attractive publication platform for authors from all parts of Europe, and even from more distant countries.

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Bernard Marti  
Associate Editors

#### Reference

- 1 *Schubert-Subbarathram H, Rougemont A.* A descriptive analysis of articles in the journal of social and preventive medicine (*Soz Präventivmed*): 1980–1990. *Soz Präventivmed* 1992; 37: 151–158.