The Council for the History of Epidemiology: A Proposal

Historical knowledge of the past provides both insight into the present and guidance for the future. As individuals, our professional lives last for a relatively short period of time, with few of us afforded the time or opportunity to reflect on how we practice epidemiology or approach the current and emerging challenges that adversely impact public health. However, the cumulative experience implicit in knowledge of history frames the present and provides us with a broader perspective on the practice of our profession.

Epidemiology is largely underappreciated, rich as it is. Yet understanding the development of one’s profession is key for establishing and maintaining identity and choosing directions. If something was tried and did not work previously, what was the reason and, equally important, what changes in approach might afford success? We rely on the recollections (and advice) of our "tribal elders," but oral traditions are vulnerable to interruption and distortion. A systematic, collective effort to compile and preserve the history of epidemiology whether in the form of materials (electronic or hard copy) or oral testaments in an on-going manner will bring immediate benefits, and both enable and ennoble future generations of epidemiologists to glean understanding and enhanced knowledge of the creation and growth of the field in which we are now the practitioners and custodians. Preservation is also important for enhancing the stature of our organizations and inspiring loyalty to them.

Background

Efforts to stimulate or even provide a forum for discussions about the history of epidemiology have been sporadic. Such efforts have been undertaken by numerous organizations or been free standing without any organizational sponsorship. For example, in 1979, Abraham Lilienfeld organized the "Times, Places, Persons" conference; in the early part of the last decade, Alfredo Morabia likewise organized a meeting on the history of epidemiology. Annual meetings of diverse societies in epidemiology may have had an incidental presentation or two on the history of epidemiology. However, there is no organized focus within which those with an interest in the history of epidemiology can meet to further that interest. Historians of medicine and public health have similar interests; however, as with presentations at association annual meetings, interchanges to discuss mutual interests have been incidental.

A related matter concerns the administration of archives for the diverse epidemiology societies. Currently, each society maintains its own archives, each in different stages of development or maintenance. There is no central facility through which one might determine the archive containing a given item, nor a common catalog. For those working on the recent history of the discipline, this situation hinders progress in the field. Similarly, there are resources, such as Henry Blackburn's site on the history of cardiovascular epidemiology and Ralph Frerichs's site on John Snow (hypothetically), for which the host institution may no longer provide support. How that situation might be addressed (at the least with maintenance), if at all possible, might be best addressed by the Council.
**Proposed Council**

To address this situation, we propose that through the American College of Epidemiology, a Council on the History of Epidemiology be organized. The Council would provide, through its activities, the forum currently lacking for those interested in the history of epidemiology.

**Mission:**
The mission of the Council would be two-fold: First, to archive and otherwise assure preservation of those materials and testaments of significance to the history of epidemiology, and second, to provide a forum and central focus for discussions about and enhanced visibility for the history of epidemiology.

**Membership:**
Membership in the Council would be as follows:

*Major Epidemiology Societies:* Each of the four major epidemiology societies (SER, ACE, IEA, and APHA Epidemiology Section) would be given two positions on the Council. All other epidemiology societies will be given one position on the Council. The method of selection of individuals from each society will be at the discretion of the respective society). Once constituted, the Council will have charge over whether a given entity is or is not an epidemiology society or an equivalent group in a society whose principal focus being epidemiology.

To facilitate interchange between professional historians of medicine and public health, two positions on the Council will be given to the American Association for the History of Medicine to fill as it sees fit. Once constituted, the Council will decide whether any other professional history of medicine/public health/science organization would be appropriate to have membership (one seat) on the Council.

Membership on the Council will be for two years, with members allowed to serve an unlimited number of terms.

The Council Chair will be elected by the Council membership, and will serve for a period of two years, with the incumbent allowed to serve an unlimited number of terms.

Elections will take place electronically.

**Finances:**
For its first two years of operation, the Council's budget (and budget requests) will be handled through the College's Communications Committee. (The expectation at this time is that such funding will be minimal--for example, perhaps coffee at a breakfast meeting at the ACE annual meeting (which may be covered by registration fees).) After that time, the Council Chair, the College’s Executive Board, and the Chair of the College’s Communications Committee will decide what would be the best mechanism by which the Council’s fiscal needs may be addressed. For example, the College’s Communications Committee might provide the best
umbrella; alternatively, the best province might be under the Secretary as part of the College's liaison efforts. By using the umbrella of the American College of Epidemiology, the Council avoids the need to incorporate, obtain its own set of corporate documents, pay corporate organization fee every year, file its own income returns, file for its own 501(c)3 tax exempt status and so on.

With regard to non-College sources of funds for the Council’s operations, possibilities include contributions by each member organization and registration fees for courses organized by the Council for College and other professional society meetings. Whether societies not contributing funds may be represented on the Council is a subject meriting further discussion within the existing membership of the Council in conjunction with appropriate individuals/entities (such as the Communications Committee) within the College.

**Operations/Activities/Meetings:**
The Council will schedule two meetings per year. Such meetings may be held electronically to facilitate participation by as many members of the Council as is possible.

In support of its activities, the Council may sponsor a session at the College's annual meeting, the annual meeting of any of its other constituent societies, or in such venues as the Council may see fit to authorize. The Council will sponsor a breakfast/lunch session at the College's annual meeting. Depending upon enthusiasm, it may do the same at the annual meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine. Should any constituent society request a similar activity at its annual meeting, the Council will, budget permitting, organize a session.

**Initiation**
Upon authorization by the College's Executive Committee, the College's Communications Committee will appoint the two members of the College to serve on the Council. Those members will in turn contact the following epidemiology societies (sponsors of the 2006 North American Epidemiology Congress) with a request that they appoint their members to the Council (assuming they are interested in participating/supporting it):

- American Academy of Pediatrics - Epidemiology Section
- Statistics in Epidemiology: American Statistical Association
- Canadian Society for Epidemiology and Biostatistics
- Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
- Eastern North American Region of the International Biometric Society
- International Epidemiology Association
- International Society for Environmental Epidemiology
• International Society for Pharmacoepidemiology
• Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America
• Society for Pediatric & Perinatal Epidemiologic Research
• Society for the Analysis of African American Public Health Issues
• Western North American Region of the International Biometric Society
• American College of Preventive Medicine
• American Diabetes Association - Council of Epidemiology & Statistics
• American Epidemiology Society
• Society for Epidemiologic Research
• Epidemiology Section, American Public Health Association
• International Genetic Epidemiology Society

The American Association for the History of Medicine will be similarly contacted. As part of that contact, a time for an initial meeting will be suggested. Skype may be used to facilitate that meeting.

Initial Meeting Agenda:

• Introductions
• Purpose of the Council
• Other societies to invite to participate
• Council operations
• Initial activities
• AOB