A Century (Almost) of the MRC Biostatistics Unit: Some History

Vern Farewell

Medical Research Council Biostatistics Unit, UK

October 12, 2011
The Beginning

THE DAWN OF HOPE.

Support the Liberal Government in their policy of SOCIAL REFORM.
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- Medical Research Committee set up in 1913 to administer the fund
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Elected Fellow of Royal Society for work on biochemistry of muscle contraction.

Appointed First Secretary (Head) of Medical Research Committee. In post for 20 years.

Oversaw transition to Medical Research Council (MRC) set up by Royal Charter in 1920 and guaranteed independence from any government department.
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  4. Statistical Department: mainly consist of persons in the permanent employment of the scheme — statistical investigations useful either as a preliminary to research or confirmatory of its results.
John Brownlee

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Appointed Director of MRC's 'Statistical Department' in 1914

Administrative principle: 'never (or hardly ever) reply to letters'

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London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Library
Major Greenwood

- Studied medicine, soon turned to research
- Appointed resident statistician in Lister Institute
- After war work, became senior statistical officer at Ministry of Health
- Chaired MRC ‘Statistical Committee’ from 1921
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REPORTS
ON
PUBLIC HEALTH AND
MEDICAL SUBJECTS
No. 33

A REPORT
ON
The Natural Duration of Cancer

By
MAJOR GREENWOOD, F.R.C.P.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

LONDON:
PUBLISHED BY HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE.
1930

Price 6d. Net.
Austin Bradford Hill

Wanted to study medicine but prevented by WWI invalided out in 1919, took correspondence degree in economics. Greenwood helped him to get MRC funding to examine high mortality in young adults in rural areas. Attended Karl Pearson’s lectures at UCL. Succeeded Greenwood in 1945: name change to Statistical Research Unit in 1948.
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PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL STATISTICS

- Based on a series of Lancet articles
- Some reluctance to publish
- 14 Editions
In the Background
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- Simon Thompson: 2000-2011
BSU publications – The First Quarter Century
BSU publications – The Third Quarter Century