

Correspondence

WE READ WITH GREAT INTEREST THE PAPER BY JANICE CHESTERS IN THE *Bulletin of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine* (vol. 2, no. 1, 2000) on the Heyfield Community Health Survey, and were gratified our survey has been recollected thirty-five years after it had been carried out. Dr Chesters kindly admitted that this was the first community health survey done in Australia, followed by the Prahran¹ and North West Region² surveys carried out by the Victorian Mental Health Research Institute. She described rather faithfully the findings of the survey, although we have to take exception to some of her statements.

We did not 'charm' the population of Heyfield and did not cover both physical and psychological health to make the survey more acceptable, but because we strongly believed and still believe that physical and mental health are interconnected. Dr Chesters stated that 'the Heyfield survey was not really a social survey'. We never claimed it to be one, but tried to assess the influence of social and familial factors on the health of the population of Heyfield. We pioneered thirty-five years ago the concept and methods of social epidemiology, advocated in the most recent issues of the official publication of the Australasian Epidemiological Association,³ which claims that 'Social Epidemiology (has been) only recently considered a sub-discipline of epidemiology'. Dr Chesters criticises the ethics of our survey, objecting to the publication of the name of the town. We have to stress that thirty-five years ago, and even later this, was acceptable and widely practised. But we never divulged the identity of any individual, as we promised at the beginning of the survey. The 'collateral inquiries' never compromised the privacy of any individual, as the persons consulted were not given the results of our findings, but provided us with information known to them. Such an approach assured the validity of our diagnoses.

The problems that have arisen after the publication of our findings were created by the irresponsible mass media, which concentrated sensationally on alcoholism and nervous disorders, omitting physical disorders, such as asthma or hayfever. We can understand how infuriated

was the population of the town when a popular television programme, 'The Mavis Bramson Show', presented Heyfield as 'a drunken town'. One of us (Alan Stoller) tried to repudiate this approach in letters to editors, but the damage had been done. We feel that Dr Chesters should concentrate her criticism on the mass media and not on the researchers, who pioneered the area of community health.

Alan Stoller and Jerzy Krupinski

1. J. Krupinski & A. Stoller (eds), *The Health of a Metropolis*, Heinemann Educational Australia, Melbourne, 1971.
2. J. Krupinski & A. Mackenzie (eds), *The Health and Social Survey of the North West Region of Melbourne*, Mental Health Authority Special Publication No. 7, Melbourne, 1979.
3. *Australasian Epidemiologist*, vol. 7, no. 3, September 2000.