

EDITORIAL

Building the Science Base for Dental Public Health

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The *Journal of Public Health Dentistry* is in its 62nd year as the official publication of the American Association of Public Health Dentistry (AAPHD), the world's largest organization devoted to the advancement of dental public health practice, training, and research. This journal serves several functions, including communicating the proceedings of AAPHD's annual meetings, providing a forum for relevant commentaries, serving as an outlet for reports of innovative and successful public health initiatives, and publishing scientific articles on dental public health topics. We also publish the proceedings of the annual meeting of the American Board of Dental Public Health, provide a permanent record of the Knutson Award ceremony of the American Public Health Association's Oral Health Section, and mark significant events in the professional lives of AAPHD members through the Archives. As important as it is to record the history of the specialty and its players, *JPHD* can perhaps best serve the field and the health of the public by helping to build and enhance the science base for dental public health practice.

JPHD has taken some steps in an attempt to encourage submissions that will inform dental public health practitioners and encourage researchers to submit their best work to this journal:

- We established the Community Action Reports section, which provides an opportunity for public health professionals to share meaningful and significant achievements, initiatives, and programs (see *JPHD* 2001;62:67).
- With the generous support of GC America Inc., we established the *JPHD* Best Paper Award, to be awarded annually to the first author of the paper

published in *JPHD* in the preceding year judged to be the best in scientific methodology, contribution, and writing. The recipient receives a cash prize and a plaque recognizing this achievement.

There are steps that authors and others can take to help us enhance the science base for dental public health, which also would improve their probability of success in publishing in *JPHD*:

- *Avoid submitting strictly descriptive findings.* For example, although it is helpful to know the mean DMFT of a target population for purposes of planning and evaluating public health programs, that type of information by itself may not be of much interest or help to the dental public health community at large.
- *Give attention to issues of sampling and data analysis.* The primary goal of a survey usually is to make inferences to a broader target population. Surveys should use sample designs that permit generalizing to the target population. Similarly, it is important that the data analysis be appropriate for the type of data being analyzed. If a study found no statistically significant difference between groups, ensure that the study had reasonable statistical power to detect the expected difference.
- *Avoid fishing expeditions.* Referees are far more impressed with hypothesis-driven and model-based analyses than tests of association among many variables with little consideration of why they would be expected to be associated with each other.
- *Consider the broad readership.* *JPHD* is becoming more international in its readership and authorship, which is a positive trend; however, this also means that terminology and

concepts common in one country often are not recognized in others. Referees may not react favorably toward a manuscript when they cannot understand the jargon.

- *Everybody needs an editor.* Get an independent set of eyes to review a manuscript for grammar, spelling, and syntax before submission.

- *Be a willing and fair reviewer.* Peer-reviewed journals such as *JPHD* rely on the good graces of independent referees to advise the editor on the scientific merit of manuscripts submitted for publication. For the most part, this process works well and helps to maintain the quality of the journal. Being a referee is a strictly voluntary role, but a critical one in ensuring a quality science base for the profession. There are surely circumstances in which an individual would be unable to provide a timely review or an unbiased appraisal of a manuscript, and in such situations an alternative referee can be selected. However, when potential referees do not respond in a timely fashion or do not respond at all, excessive delays result in the processing of submissions. This type of delay is unfair to authors and can damage the reputation of the journal. Potential referees are asked to treat other authors' submissions the way they would want their own submissions to be treated.

Ultimately, we hope *JPHD* will be a tool that can be used to help improve the health of the public and eliminate societal disparities. I thank the contributors and readers of *JPHD* for their patience and support during the two years of my editorship, and welcome any suggestions that would help us to advance dental public health practice, teaching, and research.