Letter from the Chairman

Welcome to the future of the IEA EEF

Dear colleague:

You may wish to think about the issues that follow as in a multilevel analysis. I invite you in particular to seek the connections among “levels”.

So: are we in the midst of creating something or is this already what we need and wish to have? Are the connections among levels strong enough? I’m talking of the IEA EEF, naturally. The essential “levels” are: individual members of the IEA, individual members of the national societies that are part of the IEA EEF, the IEA EEF, and the IEA at large.

I have my own gut feelings, of course, and a few ideas, but to offer some food for thought and to stimulate debate seem to be my major tasks now. The crucial questions are not that many, and they may not require a lengthy time to address, though: maybe later this year your representative in the Board of the IEA EEF –the representative of your national society– will be in a position to decide. By the way, please note that if you do not belong to a national society – if you “just” belong to the IEA–, you may have little voice in the Board of the IEA EEF. Paradoxical?

As you may see in the pages of this newsletter, currently the IEA EEF unites national societies which, together, comprise about 7,000+ members. But the Federation itself receives little from and offers even less to individual members.

Of course it’s great that the EEF exists. But is the present situation good enough? The EEF is not weak but it has a greater potential. However, to undertake more activities, to offer more, to accomplish more, it would need more resources, and a different way of operating. National societies should think about how much they could contribute, and in return for what. And to do what?

Not only national societies, but individual members as well –and the IEA at large– could get more from a stronger, more articulate EEF. Let’s take the International Journal of Epidemiology, for instance. If financial, administrative, legal and operational issues could be solved – and it seems they might–, online access to the IJE could be provided to all members of EEF national societies. It would be feasible to do so at a rather low cost, per member, to each society. A much wider access to and use of the Journal would strengthen it and it would further help to achieve its mission: first and foremost, the IJE would have more readers. An increase by 5-, 6- or even 7,000 online users would be a positive change for the IJE. It could also mean more citations, more contributors, more publicity... On a practical note, today publishers are very much looking at the number and characteristics of regular “online users” of journals. Such an “audience”, “subscription base” or “constituency” has strong implications for the academic, editorial, and economic profile of a journal. The circulation of “paper copies”
is no longer the only way to assess the stature of a journal. The IEA EEF membership makes up a dynamic, influential, highly appealing crowd. We take or influence many public health decisions, we create opinion... Although I feel that many of us are extremely happy at how George, Shah and the entire team of editors are running the Journal– let’s not forget: today, the IJE does not have the place in the minds and daily work of European epidemiologists that it should and could have.

As far as the IEA is concerned, it should be possible to raise a very reasonable amount of funds by agreeing that each national society would contribute to IEA and to the IEA EEF as a function of the number of its members; the exact form of the formula would need to be agreed upon. Maybe to some societies we could suggest an arrangement for a proportion of members, not 100%. The sum contributed by each national society would not need to be large on a “per member basis”. But it is likely to be high by today’s IEA standards. Most importantly, hence, such arrangement would not only not jeopardise IEA finances, but it could strengthen them.

Yes, a proportion of current IEA (individual) members –such as you... I am well aware– could decide to drop their IEA membership. Nonetheless, since in Europe we currently have less than 500 such individual members, a much higher number could be gained (10 times, or more). Of course, some members may feel that they do not belong to IEA as intimately as you do when you pay your individual dues directly to the IEA Treasurer... But... First, is that really a factor to which we give a heavy weight? (In the Internet age, the very nature of scientific societies is changing).

Second, it is likely that you would be paying some extra fees to your national society: the final destination of them would be the IEA and the IEA EEF.

Certainly, a number of other issues would need to be worked out (voting rights at different occasions, for instance). But in fact, such issues already need to be solved; think of the way the IEA EEF Board operates, or at how we could conduct the IEA EEF members’ (“business”) meeting during the congress in Toledo.

At the last meeting of the IEA EEF Board, in Barcelona, last November, several of us felt that we all needed some more time to mature these ideas. In the not-too-distant future, I hope we can address them again, analyse in-depth all the implications, and take action.

I suspect we are trying to fully comprehend how vast “the internet revolution” is; to understand how radically the new means of communication are changing the rules (practical, cultural, scientific) on which membership to scientific societies is (was) based; and to cope with how much science has evolved in the recent past.

Kind regards.

Yours sincerely,

Miquel Porta, MD, MPH, PhD
European Councillor, IEA
Chairman, IEA EEF
mpiea@imim.es
The History of the IEA-EEF

The IEA European Group came into existence in 1997. After only four years, the European Epidemiological Federation (EEF) emerged from it. Under the chairmanship of the IEA Councillor for Europe, Jorn Olsen, and the then past IEA chairman, Rodolfo Saracci, delegates from eight European epidemiological societies (Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy and Spain) came together in Copenhagen on February 2, 2001. The participants agreed that epidemiology needed a stronger voice in Europe and it was decided that to this end the IEA should try to join forces with national epidemiological societies.

This need arose from the perceived lack of any coherent and unified efforts to increase access to funding and to influence the concepts and implementation of data protection and ethic appraisals at the European level. A fragmented structure and splitting into subgroups of the discipline were thought to have weakened epidemiology in Europe. Collaborations across borders were to be facilitated and improved. Participants of the meeting supported this analysis and agreed on an agenda for the future. For example, national societies were invited to host the EEF during their annual scientific meetings. The development and support of epidemiology in Eastern Europe was also put high on the agenda. New by-laws were devised and a first draft was circulated among members. These by-laws explicitly invited national societies to join the EEF. Other topics discussed were how the EU-directives on data protection had been implemented in different countries, a draft document on Good Epidemiological Practice (GEP) was presented for the societies to comment, and a document on certification of epidemiologists in Europe was discussed.

The next meeting of the EEF was held in Oxford, UK, on September 12, 2001. The Toledo meeting was officially assigned as the EEF 2003 conference. A group under the leadership of Rikie de Vet started to develop and disseminate a questionnaire to national society members asking for experiences of epidemiologists in different European countries with the EU directive on data protection. Christian Junker presented an update to the GEP guidelines. Further discussion concerned the certification process and the gloomy outlook on funding by the 6th Framework Programme.

The Spanish Society hosted another EEF Board Meeting on May 3, 2002 where in particular the planning of the 2003 conference was discussed. In 2002, Miquel Porta was elected European Councillor of the IEA and new chairman of the IEA European Federation. He took up the post with great enthusiasm and assembled delegates from 10 countries (including Portugal and Poland) in Barcelona in November 2003. In a lively debate, the various aspects of epidemiology in Europe were discussed by all delegates.

The future of the IEA-EEF

There are several different futures for the EEF and it is up to us to decide which path we wish to pursue. At the moment, there are 13 member countries from a possible 37 countries. (see figure 1) Clearly not every country will have an epidemiological or public health organisation, which could become affiliated.
Within 10 of the existing member countries (excluding data from Poland, Denmark, and Yugoslavia) there are around 6000 members of which 4000 are probably epidemiologists. It is hard to quantify this as some National societies are solely for epidemiologists (e.g. France, Netherlands) whilst others are very multi-disciplinary (e.g. UK, Portugal, Switzerland). In some counties these figures are likely to be undercounts and may exclude some sub-groups e.g. infectious disease epidemiologists. Despite these data limitations, there appears to be marked variation in the rate per million population across different countries (see figure 2).

The IEA only has around 450 individual members from Europe, some of which, but not all are also members of their National society. Whilst the status quo could be maintained, there are strong arguments to consider change. If the EEF is to be a body with clout and influence, it needs to be larger and more representative of all Epidemiologists working in Europe. Whilst it could be argued that this is currently the case, as members of National societies are indirectly members of the EEF through the National representative, it makes more sense if members of the National societies are also directly members of the IEA.

Figure 1: Map of European countries showing members and non-members of EEF
This firstly avoids dual membership fees for some members. It will also disseminate the International Journal of Epidemiology, either in paper or electronic format, to a wider audience. In addition, it makes members feel part of a greater body of epidemiologists and will hopefully increase their interest in influencing the work of the IEA, which for non-members is currently seen to be a distant organisation that does little for them. Assuming that such membership is also accompanied by a modest increase in the National membership fee, it will also generate far greater funds for the EEF enabling them to be far more proactive and supporting educational as well as other activities. Clearly with so many members, it will be necessary that the EEF shows transparency in function and accountability but also responsiveness to local and European issues, be they ethical, practical, or scientific.

However, this also creates a problem for those National societies that are multi-disciplinary. For such societies, many members may not feel they wish to be members of the IEA and will not be interested in the IJE. One solution to this dilemma is the creation of optional sub-sections or interest groups within such societies. The United Kingdom Society for Social Medicine has just introduced the idea of such sub-sections. Members of the Epidemiology sub-section could agree to be members of the EEF whilst other members would not have to join. There is little doubt that if European Epidemiologists wish to play a role in influencing the European research and policy agenda, they will need to work together and build up a powerful forum that is seen to represent their interests. This will also provide an independent body to whom Governments, the EU and WHO may turn too for advice and opinion. Merging the EEF with National

Figure 2: Number of members, epidemiologists and epidemiologists per million population across different national societies of the IEA-EEF.
societies or their sub-sections is one such possibility but and we welcome an active debate on how we can best influence European Epidemiology and Public Health.

**European Epidemiology Federation Annual Scientific Meeting**

The Spanish Society of Epidemiology (SEE) is pleased to announce that its 21st annual scientific meeting will be held in the beautiful and historic city of Toledo, from the 1st. to the 4th. of October, 2003. This edition will be held jointly with the annual scientific congress of the International Epidemiological Association European Epidemiology Federation. The chosen motto for the meeting is “Epidemiology: Development and Equity”. The conference has attempted to get as much member participation as possible. So, for example, members were able to submit proposals for special sessions as well as to act as external scientific reviewers. To date, over 500 abstracts have been submitted, and these are being appraised by 74 reviewers. There will be around 10 special sessions covering areas as diverse as “The myths and realities of the Mediterranean diet” to “International developments in free software for epidemiology and public health”. In addition there is a precongress course on “Methods for Causal Inference in Epidemiology” by Prof. Miguel A. Hernán (Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, USA). Please visit [www.euroepi2003.org / index2.htm](http://www.euroepi2003.org/index2.htm) for more details and to register.

**We hope to see you in Toledo.**

**Should we call it the European Congress of Epidemiology?** The IEA EEF Board will later this year decide whether it would be appropriate to do so, and hence to use that expression along with more formal names such as Joint Scientific Meeting - Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Epidemiological Association European Epidemiology Federation (IEA EEF) and ... e.g., XXI Annual Scientific Meeting of the Spanish Society of Epidemiology (SEE) [to be exchanged, if appropriate, with the corresponding name of the co-organising society]. Let us know what you think...

**Visit the IEA-EEF in the internet**

If you want to know and see more details of the IEA-EEF network, the national societies and various activities in the field of epidemiology in Europe, just come and visit us at:

[http://www.dundee.ac.uk/iea/euro_Contents.htm](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/iea/euro_Contents.htm)

The EEF Newsletter was edited by Yoav Ben-Shlomo (y.ben-shlomo@bris.ac.uk) and Hans-Werner Hense (hense@uni-muenster.de). If you would like to respond to the newsletter or write a contribution on any aspect of epidemiology or the role of the EEF that may be of general interest to European members please email us your contribution.