

## Letters to the Editor

### Quality of Death Certificate Occupation Information

SIR: I must take issue with one statement in the otherwise excellent paper about occupational cancer priorities by Dubrow and Wegman<sup>1</sup>. On page 1135, paragraph 2, they describe the quality of the death certificate occupation information as "mediocre." I think that most of the available evidence about the completeness and accuracy of the death certificate occupation statement suggests that it is quite good, especially for males.

1) In Washington State,<sup>2</sup> interviews with next of kin show that 75% of the male death certificates have an occupational statement (usual occupation) identical to that obtained by interview. In another 10% of the cases the death certificate gave a related occupation. 2) In Bristol, England,<sup>3</sup> there was no discrepancy between the occupation of men recorded at death registration and the next-of-kin interview in 79% of the cases, and there was a "negligible" discrepancy in another 6% of the cases. 3) In the metropolitan Detroit cancer reporting system,<sup>4</sup> the usual occupation obtained at patient interview was the same as the usual occupation subsequently entered on the death certificate in 73.2% of the cases. Both sexes were present in the study group. 4) In Massachusetts,<sup>5</sup> 75% of male lung cancer cases had the same occupation on the death certificate as that obtained by interview or mailed questionnaire. 5) In the mid-1970's, while studying mortality in members of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America,<sup>6</sup> I obtained 32,707 death certificates from every state in the United States and for every province in Canada. Ninety-three percent (30,498) stated "carpenter," "cabinetmaker," or some other occupation covered by the union. Six percent gave another occupation, and only 1% gave no occupation.

<sup>1</sup>DUBROW R, WEGMAN DH. Setting priorities for occupational cancer research and control: Synthesis of the results of occupational disease surveillance studies. *JNCI* 1983; 71:1123-1142.

<sup>2</sup>PETERSEN GR, MILHAM S. Hodgkin's disease mortality and occupational exposure to wood. *J Natl Cancer Inst* 1974; 53:957-958.

<sup>3</sup>ALDERSON MR. Some sources of error in British occupational mortality data. *Br J Ind Med* 1972; 29:245-254.

<sup>4</sup>SWANSON GM, SCHWARTZ AG, BURROWS RW. An assessment of occupation and industry data from death certificates and hospital medical records for population-based cancer surveillance. *Am J Public Health* 1984; 74:464-467.

<sup>5</sup>WEGMAN DH, PETERS JM. Oat cell lung cancer in selected occupations. *J Occup Med* 1978; 20:793-796.

<sup>6</sup>MILHAM S. Mortality experience of the AFL-CIO United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, 1969-1970. Washington, DC: U.S. Govt Print Off [DHEW publication No. (NIOSH)74-129].

I think that the quality of the death certificate occupation statement in the United States and Canada is really quite good and, therefore, does not deserve being labeled "mediocre."

SAMUEL MILHAM, JR., M.D.  
Epidemiology Section, ET-13  
Division of Health  
Washington State Department  
of Social and Health Services  
Olympia, Washington 98504

SIR: As Dr. Milham documents, the error rate in the occupation statement on death certificates consistently has been found to be in the 20-30% range. This quality of data has proved to be adequate for the performance of occupational disease surveillance studies based upon death certificates and for the development of some hypotheses from these studies, including Dr. Milham's very valuable contributions. However, there is certainly much room for improvement. The National Center for Health Statistics, through funding by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, has recently published Guidelines for Reporting Occupation and Industry on Death Certificates.<sup>1</sup> This publication should aid funeral directors and registrars of vital statistics in improving the quality of occupation information on death certificates.

ROBERT DUBROW, M.D., Ph.D.  
Division of Surveillance, Hazard  
Evaluations and Field Studies  
National Institute for Occupational  
Safety and Health  
Public Health Service  
U.S. Department of Health and  
Human Services

Cincinnati, Ohio 45226

DAVID H. WEGMAN, M.D.  
Division of Environmental and  
Occupational Health Sciences  
School of Public Health  
University of California,  
Los Angeles

Los Angeles, California 90024

<sup>1</sup>National Center for Health Statistics. Guidelines for reporting occupation and industry on death certificates. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 1983.