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TEACHING STATISTICS

EDITORIAL

Our series *Statistics in the News* continues with an article on the highly topical and controversial issue of the ‘Iraq body count’. We have not changed into something like the *Journal of International Relationships*. We are focusing on a genuine *statistical* issue, of how to estimate something that is extremely difficult to get to grips with, that really matters in current affairs, and where wildly different estimates have been banded about by proponents of different points of view.

We are also trying to draw *teaching* points out of it. And we’re working on Eric Nordmoe’s key point from the previous issue: the all too common complaint from students ‘Why do I need to know this stuff? I’ll never have to use it’. By engaging with current and controversial topics, we can show that *proper* use of statistics really does matter, and hopefully this will encourage our students to take the subject seriously.

All sorts of ethical questions lurk here, and it would do no harm to discuss these with our classes in slack moments. How detached should the statistician be – or *can* the statistician be? Is there some sort of objective truth to be sought? Does the answer depend

on the question, or perhaps on our *attitude* to the question? These are very difficult issues, and probably do not themselves have truly objective answers. But among all the scientific disciplines, statistics is the one most concerned with gathering evidence, suggesting plausible assumptions, making sound inferences, weighing competing hypotheses, making conclusions. And knowing that the conclusions may be in error, but having a way to quantify that error. And knowing that it all depends on the assumptions, but being honest about those assumptions, and knowing how to examine whether they appear to be satisfied.

I’m sure that *we* all know all of that. Part of our job is to get it over to our students – and also to convince the curriculum authorities that it’s more important than knowing how to calculate the standard deviation by hand. Read on to the curriculum challenge in the article by Jim Ridgway and colleagues starting on page 44.

Gerald Goodall
Editor