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Comment

Peter Armitage

This persuasive paper should be welcomed by all biostatisticians, not least because the author succeeds in conveying his enthusiasm for (although to some extent his reservations about) Bayesian analysis without indulging in the Messianic fervor so characteristic of some of its proponents. For my part I am convinced that Bayesian methods have a major role to play in the analysis of biomedical data, although I am as skeptical about claims that they provide an all-embracing “world-view” of statistics as I am about similar claims in the realms of politics, art or religion.

Since Dr. Breslow starts with some fascinating autobiographical detail, it may not be out of place to add a few personal comments. When I entered medical

statistics in 1947, the discipline was still struggling to take on board the pre-war advances of Fisher and his contemporaries. In Britain, J. O. Irwin was, among biostatisticians, almost a lone representative of the Fisher–Neyman traditions; in the United States, Cochran had yet to enter biostatistics and take on his important leading role. (The developments of the 1920s and 1930s were, of course, more deeply established in agricultural research.) Jeffreys appeared as a lone figure of great stature but almost completely lacking in influence. Bayesian methods were propounded, in the U.K., by a few people, including W. Perks, an actuary, and I. G. Good, but to little effect, and it was not until the appearance of L. J. Savage’s book in 1954 that more than a handful of statisticians took Bayes seriously.

In the gradual process of consolidating the use of “standard” methods, most of us gave little thought to the apparently more formidable task of introducing Bayesian inference and decision theory. I must have been one of the English statisticians, during Norman

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