the start of a trial, even if they are only to be used informally. Contrasting prior beliefs with accumulating data can provide a means of identifying over-optimistic expectations, but this can only take place if those expectations have been explicitly recorded. Sometimes prior expectations can be dead on: the Beta-blocker heart attack trial (BHAT) was designed around an expected 28% drop in mortality derived from previous studies (BHAT Research Group, 1984); after 3837 patients had been randomized the observed improvement was exactly 28%! (See BHAT Research Group, 1987.) It would be rather optimistic to think that all prior judgments will be so accurate, especially when similar studies have not been carried out and one is reliant on purely subjective opinion.

An encouraging sign is the willingness of established researchers in clinical trials to take the Bayesian approach seriously: Armitage (1988, 1989) illustrates many of the points made in this discussion, while Pocock and Hughes (1990) provide details of Bayesian estimation following early termination of a trial in order to overcome the excessive bias of the standard estimate. We feel confident that slow but steady progress toward Bayesian design and monitoring will continue to be made in the future, and feel sure that Professor Breslow's paper will help in this regard.

Comment

M. Zelen

Bayesian methods have influenced our thinking about the foundations of statistical inference but have not enjoyed widespread popularity in applications. Professor Breslow's paper is a fine summary of some of the settings in which Bayesian methods have been applied with success to real data problems. The paper serves as a reminder that Bayesian methods are beginning to be utilized in the analysis of data arising in the health sciences. I would expect this trend to increase as Bayesian software becomes more available. However, even with access to appropriate software, the increased use of Bayesian methods will be dampened by the sensitivity of these methods to model specificity. A widely prevailing view is that inferences should rely on reasonably robust procedures. As a result, one is likely to see Bayesian methods applied to situations which have insufficient data to make frequency-based inferences or to situations which directly arise from Bayesian considerations. It is this latter remark on which I will comment further.

The Bayesian philosophy seems particularly appealing and appropriate in case–control settings. This methodology is aimed at inferring whether exposure to a potential causal factor is associated with the incidence of a particular disease. Starting from a collection of cases and controls, one must infer if the case exposure to a causal factor is "unusual" when compared to controls. One can use the information from a control group to calculate the posterior distribution of exposure. In many instances, there may be so much prior information available about exposure of a population (e.g., lifestyle habits of smoking and drinking, etc.) that the limited information available from a sample of controls may generate a posterior distribution of exposure which is nearly the same as the prior distribution. In such situations, one can carry out an analysis of the cases and their exposure without even generating data on a control group. The frequentist view of case–control studies does not permit studies without controls. This represents a serious shortcoming of the frequentist methodology for case–control studies. To cite an extreme example, suppose one has a potential causal factor which is rare in the population, yet the available cases all have been exposed to the causal factor. It would be ludicrous to carry out a case–control study. Yet this is what the frequency point-of-view dictates.

The frequentist model for case–control studies is that random samples are drawn from a population of cases and controls. In practice, this assumption is unrealistic and is rarely met in practice. Data on cases are usually drawn from hospitals, registries or whatever data collection mechanism would yield a convenient set of cases. Controls may be gathered in a variety of ways, but often it is not at all clear if the controls are from the same population as the cases. Various matching techniques are used to attempt to make cases and controls comparable, but there is no way to account for unknown factors which can influence

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