

**Risk of selected eye diseases in people admitted to hospital
for hypertension or diabetes mellitus: record-linkage
studies**

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Title

Risk of selected eye diseases in people admitted to hospital for hypertension or diabetes mellitus: record-linkage studies

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LETTER

Sir

We would like to respond to the letter from Carrie Huising and Gerald McGwin.¹ They assert that we should have been more technical in our use of the term 'risk'.² Our use is supported by the International Dictionary of Epidemiology, published by the International Epidemiological Association (IEA) as the gold standard on the use of epidemiological terms. It describes the use of the term 'risk' in epidemiology as follows: 'risk: the probability that an event will occur, eg that an individual will become ill or die within a stated period of time or by a certain age. Also, a non-technical term encompassing a variety of measures of the probability of a (generally) unfavourable outcome.'³ This was the definition in the latest (5th) edition of the Dictionary of Epidemiology published in 2008 and in the 4th edition published in 2001.⁴ The recommendations on the use of the terms 'rates' and 'risks', cited by Huising and McGwin, come from a book that is 30 years old.⁵

Of probable greater interest to your readers is the more general and important point that there are sometimes differences between epidemiologists in the USA and in Europe in their use of terms. Huising and McGwyn write from the USA. A well known example was the use of the terms 'retrospective' and 'prospective' studies, in the USA, synonymously with what others in the UK and elsewhere in Europe called 'case control' and 'cohort' studies. But cohort studies can be retrospective (when, at the commencement of the study, all the data on exposures and outcomes have already been collected) or prospective (when, at the commencement of the study, the data on outcomes, and sometimes on exposures too, have not yet been collected). This caused widespread confusion, and the term 'retrospective study' is 'no longer considered a synonym for case-control study'.^{3,4} This example shows how important it is to be aware of how terms are used, how usage may vary between countries, and how it moves on. For unqualified everyday words (as 'risk', without qualification, is), there is much merit in using them in ways that accord with their everyday meanings (as in the IEA comment on using risk as a non-technical term). For more truly technical terms, with a precise meaning, we agree of course that they should be used with due modern precision; but also discussed with the humility (and knowledge) to recognise that one

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view, especially if based on old writings that may lack contemporary authority, may well not be shared by all.

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Conflicts of interest

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Contributorship statement

MJG and TDLK contributed to the conception of the letter. MJG wrote the letter, and all authors revised it. MJG is guarantor.

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