

Response to Invited Commentary

Lam et al. Respond to “Driving for Further Evolution”

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Initially submitted December 18, 2014; accepted for publication December 19, 2014.

We greatly appreciate the thoughtful and nuanced comments of Dr. Robert Hiatt (1) on our review of the published cancer epidemiology literature and active grants funded by the National Cancer Institute in cancer epidemiology (2). As Dr. Hiatt noted, we acknowledged that our literature search strategy may have been limited and that our focus on National Cancer Institute–funded grants may not have comprehensively captured the subtle contribution of epidemiology in the latter forms of translational research. We agree with Dr. Hiatt’s assessment that the products of T2–T4 research may not be purely epidemiologic in nature and that epidemiology may have been integrated into the research conducted by people in other disciplines, such as research on health services, surveillance, communication, and outcomes. This integration underscores the importance of a strong epidemiologic foundation in transdisciplinary research overall. While it is possible that a more in-depth forensic tracing of these epidemiologic footprints may be required to capture the current landscape of translational epidemiology research, the additional data are unlikely to change the overall conclusion of our review—that more concerted efforts are needed to extend the reach of epidemiology beyond the discovery phase (2).

In his invited commentary, Dr. Hiatt also complemented our report by providing a historical overview of the evolution of “translation” conceptual models, which can be traced back to 1937 (1). Throughout its long history, the concept has undergone different characterizations and refinement, yet the essential message remains in that discovery findings must make the needed journey across the transitional continuum to have a population impact. Dr. Hiatt reemphasized and extended our review’s concluding message by asserting that epidemiologists could and should make more contributions to this effort and bring their skills and knowledge to the intellectual

discourse (1). One pervasive challenge facing cancer epidemiologists is that the contributions of epidemiologic findings to the cancer research enterprise are often ambiguous and/or elusive and difficult to document, and thus the field’s collective impact is vulnerable to criticism. By extending beyond the etiologic focus that currently typifies much of cancer epidemiology, the discipline might reposition itself in the overarching framework of public health and cancer research. This would be a way for cancer epidemiologists to play a more visible and documented role in the latter forms of translational research and policy engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Author affiliations: Epidemiology and Genomics Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland (Tram Kim Lam, Christine Q. Chang, Scott D. Rogers, Muin J. Khoury, Sheri D. Schully); and Office of Public Health Genomics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia (Muin J. Khoury).

Conflict of interest: none declared.

REFERENCES

1. Hiatt RA. Invited commentary: driving for further evolution. *Am J Epidemiol.* 2015;181(7):459–462.
2. Lam TK, Chang CQ, Rogers SD, et al. Evolution of the “drivers” of translational cancer epidemiology: analysis of funded grants and the literature. *Am J Epidemiol.* 2015;181(7):451–458.