

THORNTON WILDER'S ORIGINAL DESIGN OF A CASE-CONTROL STUDY

To my knowledge, results of the first case-control study (of reproductive factors and breast cancer) were reported by Lane-Clayton in 1926 (1). The original copyright date of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (2) by Thornton Wilder is 1927. Since Lane-Clayton's study and Wilder's book were conceived at about the same time, and on different sides of the Atlantic, it is safe to assume that the work of neither person influenced that of the other. Therefore, does not the following passage from Wilder's book, although fictional, constitute an independent, original description of the case-control method of epidemiologic enquiry?

It was by dint of hearing a great many such sneers at faith that Brother Juniper became convinced that the world's time had come for proof, tabulated proof, of the conviction that was so bright and exciting within him. When the pestilence visited his dear village of Puerto and carried off a large number of peasants he secretly drew up a diagram of the characteristics of fifteen victims and fifteen survivors, the statistics of their value "sub specie aeternitatis". Each soul was rated upon a basis of ten as regards its goodness, its diligence in religious observation, and its importance to its family group. Here is a fragment of this ambitious chart:

	Goodness	Piety	Usefulness
Alfonso G.	4	4	10
Nina	2	5	10
Manuel B.	10	10	0
Alfonso V.	-8	-10	10
Vera N.	0	10	10

The thing was more difficult than he had foreseen. Almost every soul in a difficult frontier community turned out to be indispensable economically, and the third column was all but useless. The examiner was driven to the use of minus terms when he confronted the personal character of Alfonso V., who was not, like Vera N., merely bad he was a propagandist for badness and not merely avoided church but led others to avoid it. Vera N. was indeed bad, but she was a model worshipper and the mainstay of a full hut. From all this saddening data Brother Juniper contrived an index for each peasant. He added up the total for the victims and compared it with the total for survivors to discover that the dead were five times more worth saving.

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This quote is taken out of context, and is not meant to convey or imply anything about Wilder's fine and moving book. It is presented as a missed contribution to epidemiology from an unlikely source.

References

1. Lane-Clayton JE. A further report on cancer of the breast. Reports on Public Health and Medical Subjects 32. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1926.
2. Wilder T. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1939 and 1968.

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