statistical society of australia incorporated

SSAI newsletter

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Dr Geoff Robinson Receives Service Award

At the March Annual General Meeting of the Victorian Branch, the Branch President, Kay Lipson, presented Dr Geoff Robinson with a Society Service Award. Geoff's contributions to the Society have been multivariate and multidimensional. He has served as a Victorian Branch Councillor for 12 years, including a term as Branch President (1989-1990). He was chair or co-chair of the Industrial Statistics Section from 1996 to 2001, and was a member of the organising committee of the twelfth of the Society's biennial conferences, ASC12, held at Monash University in July 1994. He has given several presentations to Branch meetings: these cannot be characterised by a mean and a variance, but his most recent talk, 'The analysis of small and non-existent data sets', in November 2002 is a canonical example of his irreverent style. Geoff's Service Award is the fourth to a Victorian Branch Member. Previous recipients were Nick Garnham (1998), Malcolm Clark (1998) and Jane Matthews (2001). In addition, Tony Pakes of Western Australia received an award in 2001, partly in recognition of his term as Victorian Branch Secretary (1973-1976) and Treasurer (1978-1979).

Kay Lipson presenting the Service Award certificate to Geoff Robinson. Photo: Brian Phillips

In this issue

J.B. Douglas Postgraduate Awards for Excellence

The *J.B. Douglas Postgraduate Awards for Excellence in Statistics* are named in recognition of the contributions to the discipline of Professor Jim Douglas, colleague, mentor and friend to many in our profession.

The awards are decided on the basis of a competition for NSW graduate students, late in their research programs for masters or PhD degrees. Outcomes are determined by 20 minute presentations made to members of the NSW Branch and their guests.

For the first time in 2003 the NSW branch initiated a sponsorship program by inviting some sponsors to support these Awards. It is a great pleasure to record that (in alphabetical order) Roche Pharmaceuticals, SAS Australia, the School of Mathematics and Statistics (University of Sydney), the School of Quantitative Methods and Mathematical Sciences (University of Western Sydney) and Wollongong Statisticians all gave generous support as major sponsors.

If the Branch is able to obtain sponsorship to the same level in future years, it will be possible to support the scholarship of our brightest and best at a far greater level than prior to 2000, in a more appropriate way, and at far reduced cost to the Branch's membership.

L to R student winners are: Ruth Penman (Macq. Uni.), Robert Denham (Newcastle Uni.), Timothy Dobbins (Sydney Uni.), and Nicholas Von Sanden (Wollongong Uni.).

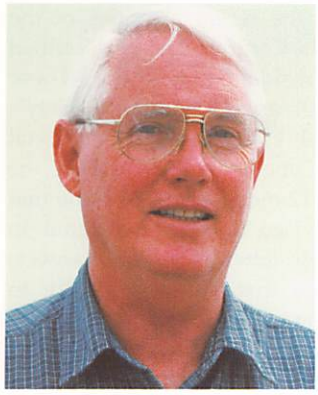
The talks were judged by a panel of 4 consisting of Professor Peter Hall (ANU), Associate Professor John Rayner (Chair, President of the Branch), Associate Professor Judy Simpson (University of Sydney) and Ms Melissa Cassar (Academic Program Manager, SAS Australia). The Council expresses its grateful appreciation for the generosity of the judges in giving so much time and care to this task.

The panel reported that all seven talks were excellent and recommended the award of a special certificate for each student. In addition to these certificates, the following students received cash prizes of $400 each:

- Timothy Dobbins, University of Sydney
- Nicholas Von Sanden, University of Wollongong
- Robert Denham, University of Newcastle.
- Ruth Penman, Macquarie University, received a cash prize of $200.

After the Awards proceedings, Peter Hall gave a much-appreciated talk on *Statistical Inference in a High-Dimension, Low Sample-Size Setting*. This was followed by the Annual Dinner, to fill out a long and rewarding day.

President's Corner



Review of Statistics in Australian Universities

As part of its Strategic Plan, the SSAI is developing initiatives to address the shortage of suitably qualified statisticians entering the job market in Australia. In response to concerns expressed by some employers and a specific request from the Minister, the Hon. Brendan Nelson, to look at what needed to be done for the tertiary sector, the SSAI has been considering a suggestion to conduct a review of the current situation with undergraduate and graduate Statistics teaching in Australian universities. More information about the proposed review and recent developments can be found at the SSAI web site: www.statsoc.org.au

ANZJS

The trans-Tasman group examining whether the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Statistics (ANZJS) should become electronic-only is in the final stages of drafting a set of recommendations to be submitted to the executives of NZSA and SSAI. The recommendations may be ready in time to be included as a separate flyer with this Newsletter but if not then go the SSAI website because they will be placed there immediately upon release.

IBC/ASC 2004

Arrangements for IBC/ASC 2004 in Cairns are entering the final stages and early bird registrations exceeded 550 with plenty of bookings for the tours planned for Wednesday 14th July. It looks highly likely that a second reef tour will take place as the first one has been booked out for some time. Other tour and dinner bookings have exceed the minimum required and places are still available.

If you have not registered and booked yet, get in early so that you get your preferred accommodation. Remember that July in Cairns is peak season!

Accreditation

A letter to the editor published in the February issue of the SSAI Newsletter raised several factual questions about accreditation. Firstly, 126 members have been accepted as qualifying for AStat and 29 for GStat after submitting applications to the Accrediation Committee. Therefore quite a high proportion of members see this as being an important and worthwhile qualification to have. Accredited statisticians pay an application fee to become accredited and also pay higher annual membership fees. Even when discounts for conference registration and professional development courses are taken into account there are still sufficient funds left to pay for the administrative costs involved. This means that other non-accredited members of the Society are not contributing to the cost of maintaining an accreditation system. Accreditation is entirely voluntary and members are free to choose whether they wish to participate or not.

Public awareness campaigns are aimed at raising awareness of the profession as a whole and it is important to be able to tell the public that such a profession exists and is sufficiently well developed that it has a system of accreditation. Constructive suggestions and new ideas are always welcome.

Diversity of views is the norm within the Society and this is one of our profession's strengths. I am reminded of a quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin

"If every one is thinking alike, then no one is thinking".

Neville Bartlett
Email: neville@nrbartlett.com.au

Website of the month

In keeping with the competition announced this month, the website of the month is that of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, http://www.whoi.edu/. Although the institution does not mention statistics explicitly anywhere on its website, it does state that the Applied Ocean Physics and Engineering Department researches topics including image processing and signal processing and estimation, and the Geology and Geophysics Department researches topics including climate change. It's clear that the work they do requires statistical input, and it's fascinating to surf through yet another area of application of our discipline.

Phantom vans

In a huge US auto fraud, a dealer managed to skim $A800 million off one of the world's leading car makers.

Makers lend their dealers money to cover the cost of keeping vehicles for sale on their lots. In this case the dealer borrowed $12 billion over six years, using some of it for his own purposes and the rest to pay back previous loans.

What should have alerted the car maker was the statistics: in one month the dealer borrowed $850 million, supposedly to buy 17,000 customised vans – equal to the entire US production for that month. Of course, the vans did not exist.

Another case where not keeping a professional hand on the numbers can prove expensive.

Statistics: a job for professionals

www.statsoc.org.au/PublicAwareness

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Disclaimer

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Subscriptions

The Newsletter of the Statistical Society of Australia is supplied free to all members of the society. Any others wishing to subscribe to the Newsletter may do so at an annual cost of A$25.00 for an issue of four numbers.

Advertising

Advertising will be carried in the Newsletter on any matters which the Editors feel are of interest to the members of the Society. For details of advertising rates, etc. contact the Editors at the above addresses.

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DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE: 17 JULY 2004

Editorial

The award season is upon us! Hollywood had its "night of nights" in late February when the Academy Awards were presented. The Australian television industry distributed its Logie awards in April. This issue of the newsletter features statistical awards, both to students at the start of their statistical careers and long-serving members of the Society. Congratulations to all the winners!

This newsletter also offers plenty of opportunity for participation too. Branch and Section reports are here as usual (have YOU been to a Branch meeting recently?) There are also conference reminders (have YOU registered for ASC/IBC in Cairns yet?).

Some of the recent activities of the Society at the Central level are described in the President's column. These activities all arise from the Society's Operational Plan. What Operational Plan? The one that appeared in the newsletter 12 months ago. The one that will be revised and appear again in the next newsletter. If there are aspects of this plan that you would like to comment on, or be involved in, please speak to your Branch President. Contact details for all the Branches appear in a column elsewhere in this newsletter.

Finally, there is a new competition in this issue. Submit your entry to the Editors by the next newsletter deadline of 10 July.

Competition

We have received only one entry in our adjective competition. Kuldeep Kumar suggests an appropriate adjective for describing statisticians is NORMAL.

This month we are announcing a new competition. The *New Scientist* magazine of 25 January 2003 contained the following report in its Feedback column. "On a recent trip to the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, Feedback was surprised to see a Niskin bottle mounted as a trophy on the wall of the institution's lobby.

A Niskin bottle is a device for collecting samples of ocean water at great depth. It consists of a metre-long section of hollow tubing with snap-shut lids at either end that can be cocked before use. Once the bottle has been lowered into the water, the lids are triggered remotely and snap shut, trapping a sample. The "Niskin Cup" is awarded to the winner of the annual ice hockey game between Woods Hole and the Graduate School of Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island nearby. But why a Niskin bottle trophy?

We were shocked to learn that competition between these sides has been so fierce in the past that teams have sunk to using ringers – accomplished players from outside the world of oceanography – to secure a win. So to stamp out this unfair practice, all players must now prove their pedigree by performing the tricky business of cocking and triggering the bottle before the game. An admirable test, and one that set us wondering what trophies other disciplines might compete for."

The Editors invite you to suggest what trophy two teams of statisticians might compete for? A calculator displaying the sample standard deviation perhaps? Submit your ideas to the Editors by the next newsletter deadline of 10 July.

Clunies Ross National Science and Technology Awards

The 2004 ATSE Clunies Ross Awards were presented at a ceremony in Melbourne in March. Awards went to scientists and engineers from Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne. They are people who have persisted with their ideas (often against the odds) to the point that their innovations are making a real difference to Australia economically, environmentally and/or socially.

Statisticians have featured amongst the medal winners: in 1999, Jane Watson of the University of Tasmania received an award for her commitment to "enhancing the statistical literacy which young people will need as active citizens in the modern community". The closing date for nomination for the 2005 awards is 31 July, and the Editors urge you to consider nominating a colleague from a statistical discipline.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editors,

I am writing in regard to Marks Nestor's criticisms of the accreditation of SSAI members. I feel that it is intolerable that statisticians like Marks display such obvious common sense (which isn't common) and should immediately be burned on the BBQ (along with Paul Hogan's prawn) for their heresy! What has common sense to do with statistics, I ask you?

"Accreditation" has or is being considered by a number of professional bodies; eg accounting, market research, statistics, etc. Although I am a Fellow of the Market Research Society, I still had to apply for accreditation, filling out a very long questionnaire of which the Spanish inquisition would have been proud, among which were tests of whether I understood the impact of long questionnaires on respondent cooperation.

What is behind "accreditation"? The reason is partly to raise the profile of the profession among employers, and partly because (let's be frank) it is an acknowledgement that it is not as easy to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of what we do. Poor medicine or poor engineering usually has obvious outcomes; patients die and buildings collapse. With statistics, and especially if it comes out of a computer, everyone kowtows to the 3rd decimal point because it is an area of mathematics which they do not understand.

However, as I used to teach my Monash business students, confidence limits merely tell you that, given a random sample of 1,000 people, if you ask silly questions in opinion surveys, statistical theory promises you that you will get much the same rubbish in their answers in a repeat survey, within +/- 3 percentage points.

The ABS provides estimates of the resident population of Australia, but many people do not realise the "the estimated resident population" (or ERP) is a technical definition, more closely defining a legal status. It does not mean that all of those people actually reside in Australia. In other words, to make sense of much of the data which statisticians may use, you need to understand the principles of measurement or validity; i.e. knowing what it is, which you are really measuring. In survey work, this is our constant challenge, trying to devise questions or measurement procedures, which carry some validity.

And then you find many learned journals, where the authors are sloppy (and often ignorant) in their language; eg a finding which is "statistically significant", becomes a "significant finding". What is not appreciated is that (taking my survey example) if 52% of men do it and 48% of women - and the sample is a random sample of the 1,000 people from the population - then while the difference is "statistically significant", it is almost certainly of no managerial or decision-making importance, whatsoever! Unfortunately, many public and private sector organisations do not appreciate such basic issues, and merrily waste money developing separate policies for their "significantly different" groups, when one policy would have suited both. It's a pity that those same decision-makers weren't forced to spend their own money on their naïve decisions, and instead, are allowed to get away with spending "other people's money"; eg that of taxpayers and shareholders.

My final example is from medical research – I can't be bothered discussing econometric modeling, but the same rule applies - where we are regularly informed of studies, which the authors have discovered a "statistically significant" difference in treatments or death rates between people who do or use X and others Y. There are exceptions, but rarely, do you get a plain English answer relating to the power of the result; eg "if I do X, I am 20% more like to die before I am 50, or if I use Y, my chances of recovery are increased 2-fold".

Both my cynical nature and practical experience tell me that this happens because the PhD authors are not street-smart about statistics and feel the compulsion to publish. I have a famous example where an academic colleague gave a student 1st class Honours and I failed him; the thesis topic required the student to demonstrate "X>Y", but instead, only proved "X>0".

My agreement with Nestor - among other things - is that if university academics with PhDs in research can get it so wrong, what does "accreditation" really mean?

I am not against the Society promoting its image in the community. But it is naïve to think "accreditation" equals "competence".

Regards,

Geoff Alford

Member News

On 16 March, Melissa Dobbie (Statistician, CSIRO, Queensland) and Dave Matthews welcomed Oscar into their world. All is well with mum and bub, although achieving more than 3 hours of consecutive sleep during the night seems like a big challenge at the moment!

Melissa with Oscar aged one week.

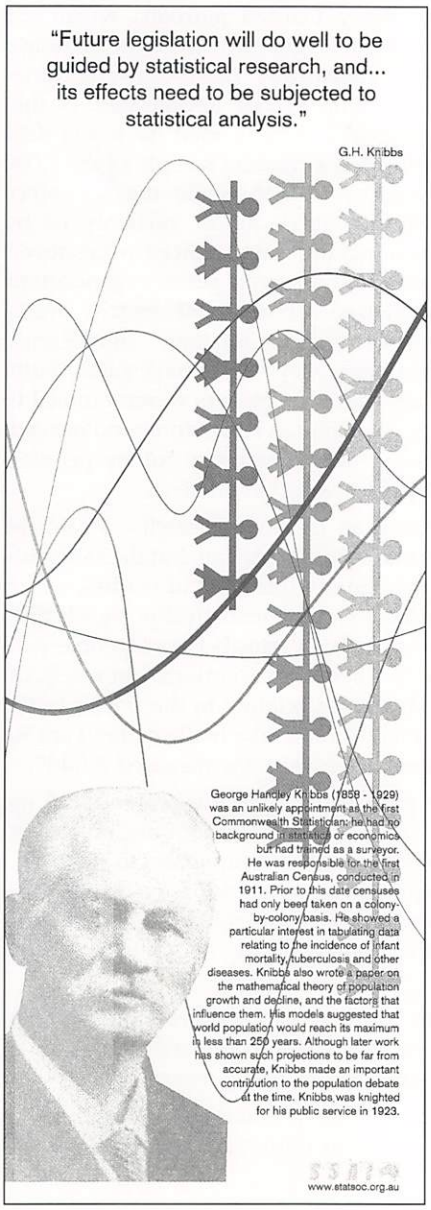
Two members of the SSAI were finalists in the Australian Awards for University Teaching last year. This is a real win for statistics, as they made the finals in the competitive Physical Sciences category. The SSAI finalists were Helen MacGillivray (from QUT) and Peter Petocsz (UTS). Congratulations to both of them. The list of finalists is at http://www.autc.gov.au/aw/2003_winners.htm

This is the third time a member of the society has made the finals, so things are definitely looking up for Stats!

• • • • • • • • •

Professor Alan Welsh returned to the Australian National University in January 2004 to take up a Chair in Statistics in the Mathematical Sciences institute. Alan is returning from a three-year position as Head of the Statistics group in the School of Mathematics at the University of Southampton. It's very exciting to welcome him back into the Australian statistical community.

Feature: A Celebration of Statistics in Australia



The Canberra Branch, in conjunction with Central Council and the University of Canberra, is delighted to announce that it has completed a pilot project to produce a series of posters for display in universities, in workplaces, indeed in any location frequented by people with an interest in statistics.

The main aim of the pilot project was to celebrate the history of statistics in Australia. The idea arose from a scheme operating at the University of Canberra. In the first semester of their third year, Graphic Design students at the university design posters for external clients as a part of their assessment. There is a charge for printing, and a minimal design fee.

In early 2003, we realised that the SSA could make use of this opportunity. However there was insufficient time to gain widespread support for the project amongst the statistical community. A pair of Graphic Design students became involved immediately in designing four posters on important Australian statisticians. They eventually handed the project on to a third student who completed the work in November.

The poster series is a celebration of statistics in Australia, focusing on four important Australian statisticians – Cornish, Knibbs, Lancaster and Pitman. These men were chosen to represent a range of the Australian states and a range of areas of application/theory, as well as for the importance of their work. Other statisticians who were considered for the posters were Belz, Moran, Hannan, Wilkinson, Foreman and Watson.

With such a variety of people and contributions that could be displayed on a poster, we see the current series as a pilot project. Next year we would like to continue the project. We would now like to consult with other branches to reach agreement on the intended audience, poster aims, poster series topics, individual poster topics, material to be included on each poster, and methods of marketing the posters. Possible aims for future poster series could include

1. encouraging students to study statistics and become statisticians;
2. promoting statistics as a profession;
3. raising awareness of important scientific advances that have been made by applying/developing statistical techniques; and
4. showing the range of the disciplines in which statisticians are employed.

If you have a comment about the current set of posters, or would like to discuss ideas for future posters, please use the discussion board on the SSAI website. Go to http://www.statsoc.org.au/~ssacanb and follow the link to the discussion board.

The limited print run of posters will be sold by the SSAI Office at a cost of $30 for the series of four posters. These funds will be used to refund the Canberra Branch and the University of Canberra for their part of the funding, and support a broader project in 2004. We hope that every university department in Australia will purchase a set, along with a wide variety of workplaces where statistical methods are in frequent use.

Ann Cowling and Alice Richardson

Order form – **Statistical Society Posters**

Please supply: 1 set of posters at $30. ☐

2 sets of posters for $50. ☐

(insert number) _____ additional sets of posters, $20 each ☐

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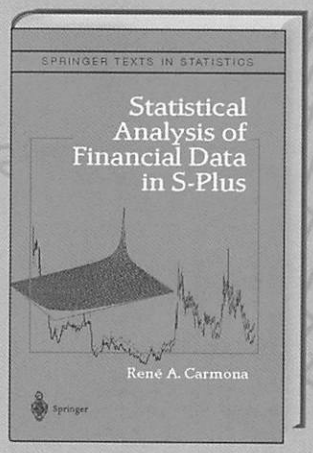

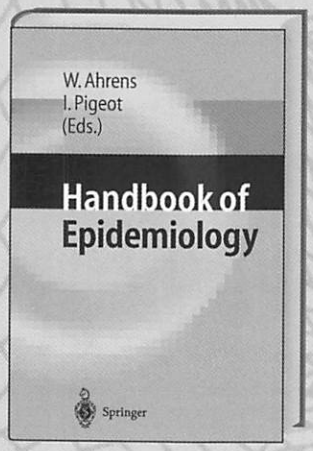

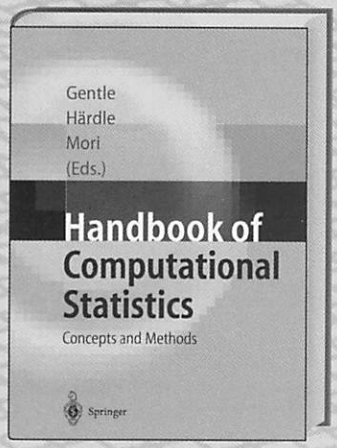

R. A. Carmona

Statistical Analysis of Financial Data in S-Plus

This book develops the use of statistical data analysis in finance, and it uses the statistical software environment of S-PLUS as a vehicle for presenting practical implementations from financial engineering.

Sprinkled with practical examples using market data and exercises at the end of each chapter.

2004. XVI, 451 p.144 illus. (Springer Texts in Statistics)
Hardcover **€ 79,95**; sFr 135,50; £ 61,50
ISBN 0-387-20286-2

R. M. Simon, E. L. Korn, L. M. McShane, M. D. Radmacher, G. W. Wright, Y. Zhao

Design and Analysis of DNA Microarray Investigations

Presents state-of-the-art analysis methods with minimal mathematical notation and a focus on concepts. An authoritative review of the methods available presented in a manner that is intelligible to biologists.

2004. X, 199 p. 58 illus., 15 in color.
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2004. Approx. 1000 p. Hardcover
€ 249,00; sFr 421,00; £ 191,50 ISBN 3-540-00566-8
(Due June 2004)

Prepublication price, valid until 30.09.2004:
€ 199,95; sFr 338,50; £ 154,00

Handbook of Computational Statistics

Concepts and Methods

Edited by J. E. Gentle, W. Härdle, Y. Mori

The handbook provides an up-to-date coverage of the topic with contributions by first-rate authors. The editors have been involved in this research area from the beginning and have all given substantial input to the development of the discipline.

2004. Approx. 900 p. 150 illus. Hardcover
€ 249,00; sFr 421,00; £ 191,50 ISBN 3-540-40464-3
(Due June 2004)

Prepublication price, valid until 30.09.2004:
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A. C. Atkinson, M. Riani, A. Cerioli

Exploring Multivariate Data with the Forward Search

This book is a companion to Atkinson and Riani's Robust Diagnostic Regression Analysis. Topics covered include principal component analysis, discriminant analysis, cluster analysis and the analysis of spatial data.

2004. XXI, 621 p. 390 illus. (Springer Series in Statistics)
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J. Bucklew

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Register your interest NOW for the 2005 Session of the International Statistical Institute

5 – 12 April 2005

Dates

The 2005 ISI Session will be held between 5 – 12 April 2005.

Venue

The 55th Session will be held at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour.

Scientific Program

A diverse and cutting edge Scientific Program has been developed for the 2005 ISI Session and includes Invited Paper Meetings, Contributed Paper Meetings, Key note speakers, Poster Sessions, Tutorials and Short Courses. Theme days will cover Statistics and Finance, Environmental Statistics and Genomic Data.

All the details for the Scientific Program, including the list of Invited and Contributed Paper Meetings, are listed on the 2005 ISI website at www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005

Did you know that you can also submit your papers online? See Information Bulletin I or the website www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005 for more details.

Key Dates

July 2004 – Information Bulletin II (with attached forms for final registration, accommodation bookings, social functions and tour reservations will be circulated to all pre-registered delegates.

Before 5 September 2004 – Preliminary Registration Forms to be returned to the Conference Managers

Before 6 December 2004 – Authors of invited and contributed papers to submit the final manuscripts

Before 31 January 2005 – Early Registration fee cut off

After 31 January 2005 – Late Registration fee applies

Social Program Outline

The Social Program will be a highlight of the 55th Session of the ISI and has been designed to provide participants with an opportunity to relax, experience a taste of Australian culture and maximise networking opportunities. See Information Bulletin I or the Session website www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005 for more details.

Tuesday 5 April 2005	The Official Opening Ceremony and Welcome Reception
Wednesday 6 April 2005	Optional Event: A night at the opera
Thursday 7 April 2005	Australiana Night at Luna Park
Friday 8 April 2005	Optional Event: Discover the Historic Pubs of The Rocks
Saturday 9 April 2005	Excursion Day
Sunday 10 April 2005	Excursion Day
Monday 11 April 2005	Optional Event: Farewell Party – Cruise on Sydney Harbour

Trade Exhibition and Sponsorship and Advertising Opportunities

A trade exhibition will be held in conjunction with the 2005 ISI Session. This Exhibition will cover a wide range of services related to the statistical profession.

Any company wishing to exhibit its products or services within the Trade Exhibition is encouraged to contact the Conference Managers or visit the website.

A range of sponsorship options are also available, from advertising in the various Session publications or website through to major sponsorships. For further information or to develop a package that meets your needs, contact the Conference Managers.

Tours

A range of mid –Session and Pre and Post Tours will be provided for delegates and accompanying persons. See the website www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005 or Information Bulletin I for details.

Register your interest NOW!!

If you are interested in participating in the 2005 ISI Session please complete the online registration form at www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005 or return the Preliminary Registration Form in Bulletin I to the Conference Managers. This way you can be sure you will be kept up to date with Session developments.

Contact Details

ISI 2005 Conference Managers
GPO Box 128
SYDNEY NSW 2001
Telephone: +61 02 9248 0800
Fax: +61 2 9248 0800
Email: isi2005@tourhosts.com.au
www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005

NEWSFLASH

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For the latest information and online paper submission visit **www.tourhosts.com.au/isi2005**

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NOTICE

The Annual General Meetings of
The Statistical Society Of Australia Inc and
The Australian Statistical Publishing Association Inc. will
be held on Tuesday 13 July 2004 at 12.30pm
in the Cairns Convention Centre, Cairns, Queensland.

SSAI Annual General Meeting — Agenda

1. Apologies and Proxies
   Proxies must be given in writing as per form inserted in the May 2004 issue of SSAI Newsletter. Proxy forms must be received by the SSAI Executive Officer for passing to the Secretary no later than 24 hours before the time of the meeting.
2. Confirmation of the Minutes — Minutes of the meetings as circulated
3. Matters arising
4. Reports
   - 4.1 President
   - 4.2 Treasurer
   - 4.3 Branches
   - 4.4 Sections
5. Accreditation
   - 5.1 Report from Accreditation Committee
6. Conferences
   - 6.1 ASC 2004 / IBC 2004
   - 6.2 ASC 2006 (joint with NZSA, in Auckland)
   - 6.3 ASC 2008
   - 6.4 SSAI involvement in ISI 2005 (Sydney)
7. Election of Section Chairs
   Nominations for Section Chairs should be received at the SSAI office no later than 2 July 2004. Nomination Forms have been inserted in each copy of the May issue of SSAI Newsletter. All nominations require a seconder and a statement from the nominee that she or he is prepared to stand.
8. Appointment of signatories
9. Special Business
   Consider and, if thought fit, approve amendments to the Rules of the Statistical Society of Australia Incorporated. (**)
10. Other business
11. Time and place of next meeting.

ASPAI Annual General Meeting — Agenda

1. Apologies and Proxies
   Proxies must be given in writing as per form inserted with May 2004 issue of SSAI Newsletter. Proxy forms must be received by the SSAI Executive Officer for passing to the Secretary no later than 24 hours before the time of the meeting.
2. Confirmation of the minutes - Minutes of the meetings as circulated
3. Matters arising
4. Presentation of the Annual Report by the Editor of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Statistics
5. Presentation of the Annual Report by the Newsletter Editors
6. Treasurer's Report
7. Appointment of signatories
8. Special Business
   Consider and, if thought fit, approve amendments to the Rules of the Australian Statistical Publishing Association Inc. (**)
7. Other business
8. Time and place of next meeting.

(**) Copies of the amendments to the Rules of the Statistical Society of Australia Inc. and of the Australian Statistical Publishing Association Inc. may be obtained from the Society's office, or viewed on the Society's Web site.

Section News

Hello again. Continuing on from the inaugural article in the previous newsletter I am glad to report that we have international contributors lined up to provide their perspectives on the world of Statistics in the Medical and Health Sciences in forthcoming issues of the newsletter. In this issue, A/Prof Robert Gibberd discusses his views on current and future statistical research issues in the medical field.

Robert has been a lecturer in Statistics at The University of Newcastle since 1974 until recently joining the Centre for Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Faculty of Health, The University of Newcastle. He is Director of the Health Services Research Group, since establishing the group in 1989, and is co-director of NEWSTAT, a statistical consulting group.

I trust you look forward to future instalments and for those who read my column last issue you may remember I said I'd submit my PhD (Statistics) thesis in early 2004.....I'm pleased to be able to say I have done so.

All the best,

A slightly less-stressed Peter Howley.

'A brief journey around the globe'

D.A.T.A. – Data, Analysis, Then Action in health care

There are many opportunities to work in medical statistics. The most common areas involve either experimental studies such as randomised controlled trials or cohort or case-control studies. There are also many courses that cover this material. One area that is rather poorly developed is the study of patient safety or quality of the health care that we provide as a result of these other studies. This is surprising, given that is now accepted that the level of disability to patients caused by the medical care provided is high. The Australian study in 1995 that found that 16% of admissions to hospital were associated with an adverse event has now been replicated in several other countries with similar findings. Three broad statistical areas need to be developed as a result of these studies.

1. Defining and classifying patient injury and developing methods to measure, report and act on the data.
2. Developing new and, most likely, non-standard statistical methods to report on the large volumes of health data (GP visits, hospital admissions, emergency department visits, clinical indicators). Methods to use the data to screen for areas with potential to improve are being developed.
3. Transferring the methods and the tools of quality improvement that are used by industry to health professionals, so that waste, re-work and errors are reduced.

Given that the cost of the extra hospital beddings resulting from medical error is over 1 billion dollars per annum in Australia, and the real costs in terms of lost wages and premature disability is many billions, it is hard not to conclude that this is going to be the most exciting and important area for statisticians to work in for the 21st century.

by A/Prof Robert Gibberd.

Branch Reports

CANBERRA

Talk on bovine tuberculosis by Professor Sir David Cox

At the monthly meeting of the Canberra Branch of the SSAI on 10 February 2004, Professor Sir David Cox of Nuffield College, Oxford, gave a talk titled "Bovine tuberculosis: Some statistical aspects", with a focus on the British experience. It was a rare privilege to hear such a distinguished guest speaker, who has published over 250 papers, written 16 books, been the editor of Biometrika for 25 years, and become a household name amongst statisticians worldwide.

Bovine tuberculosis (BTB) is caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* which lives in cattle and wildlife. Examples are water buffalo in Australia and Africa, possums in New Zealand, and badgers and deer in the UK. Although *Mycobacterium bovis* is not the primary cause of human tuberculosis it was a major source of the disease in the UK up to the early 1920's after which the public health impact was almost entirely controlled by the pasteurisation of milk. A long campaign of testing led to the virtual elimination of BTB in most of the country by the 1970's although a pocket of disease remained in the South West (Devon and Cornwall). However, the incidence of BTB infection in cattle began to increase in about 1980 and became an issue of serious concern about 10 years ago by a general increase and geographical spread. This concern led the UK government to set up a committee in 1996 to study the problem. The committee's findings included a conclusion that while there was quite compelling observational evidence that badgers were partly responsible for the recent increases in incidence, a randomised trial should be set up to settle the matter.

In this trial there were three 'treatments': a control, and badger removal operations (BRO's) in two forms: proactive culling, meaning killing as many badgers as possible in a selected area; and reactive culling, meaning killing locally around an infected area. In both cases BRO's were made to take place in roughly circular areas of about 100 square kilometres, most of them being in the south west of the UK.

The Independent Scientific Group managing the trial on behalf of DEFRA (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) have recently analysed the reactive culling data using Poisson regression with an allowance for overdispersion. It would appear that this type of BRO not only had no effect on the infection rate in cattle but that it was actually harmful. There are several possible reasons for this. First, it has been suggested by animal ecologists that disturbing badgers may cause them to move around more and hence lead to a greater spread of infection (the perturbation theory). There were a number of other sources of difficulty. Farmer participation was voluntary, although the participation rate was high. Also, there was some possibility of illegal culling of badgers in the control areas. Finally, there was typically a significant delay between when an area was deemed infected and when reactive culling would actually begin, sometimes in excess of six months.

Talk on locating lines in seismic data by Professor Peter Hall

At the monthly meeting of the Canberra Branch of the SSAI on 2 March 2004, Professor Peter Hall of the Centre for Mathematics and its Applications at the Australian National

University gave a talk titled "Locating lines among scattered points". The talk was an account of recent work done jointly by Peter and researchers in Sweden and the US. It was preceded by the AGM of the Canberra Branch and followed by a superb barbecue. Several new members attended.

Seismic events along a geophysical fault line are typically recorded in space-time pairs, where the spatial component represents the distance of an event along the fault. A small proportion of pairs result from bursts of energy which propagate along the fault at approximately constant speeds, causing seismic events as they go. These bursts generate roughly linear clusters of points in the space-time plane, with a slope proportional to the speed at which energy travels along the fault line. Identifying these clusters is of intrinsic geophysical interest.

The fault line in question is a section of the San Andreas Fault near Parkfield in California. Available are thousands of data points (pairs) recorded from 1987 to 1998. The proposed technique is to repeatedly overlay a small window onto the space-time plane and each time conduct a hypothesis test of whether the points in a narrow strip along the middle of the window come from a process with the same intensity as elsewhere in the window.

Although ad hoc, the proposed procedure has attractive theoretical properties, especially from the perspective of minimax when the intensity is high. The problem has connections with the analysis of ley lines (or leys), which are alignments of ancient sites stretching across a landscape, such as those at Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Leys were 'rediscovered' by Alfred Watkins in 1921 and extensively studied in the UK in the 1980's, resulting in several papers in the applied probability literature.

Talk on measuring Australia's health and welfare by Ken Tallis

At the meeting of the Canberra Branch of the SSAI on 30 March 2004, Ken Tallis of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) gave a talk on that Institute and some of the work which has been carried out there. Ken moved to the AIHW six months ago after many years as a researcher at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, other departments and universities.

The AIHW's mission is 'Better health and wellbeing for Australians through better statistics and information.' The organisation is based in Canberra and has about 200 staff. AIHW staff undertake both data assembly, in particular the compilation of administrative by-product data, and analysis and research. The AIHW has two main areas of activity, as suggested by its name. Under the banner of Health, it collates and analyses data on population health and particular conditions such as cancer, cardio-vascular disease (CVD), diabetes, and so on; and under Welfare it deals with housing, supported accommodation, and disability. Some parts of the Institute pursue cross-cutting work related to, say, ageing, children and youth, and Indigenous health and welfare. The AIHW also analyses labour force and expenditure data relating to provision of health and welfare services.

The Institute also has around half-a-dozen collaborating units in various universities, pursuing measurement and analysis in such fields as asthma, dental health, diabetes, general practice, perinatal health and HIV/AIDS.

The work of the Institute is very diverse, and Ken tied his discussion together through the formulation 'Who delivers what services to whom at what cost and with what effect?' He focussed on several questions of current policy as research interest, namely 'Has the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples improved during, say, the past decade?' and 'What will population ageing do to the demand for and supply of health services?'

For many of its key datasets, the Institute relies on eight separate data streams, one from each state and territory in Australia. Coordinating this data is difficult because of differences in procedures and definitions, and the Institute is active in calling for consistent data reporting standards nationwide. This consistency is important for many of the Institute's undertakings, such as its burden of disease study, which attempts to estimate the numbers of years of life lost due to particular diseases, and the numbers of years expected to be spent in various states of disability.

The AIHW has many other data problems to contend with, and some of these are due to the statistics of interest being ratios with inconsistent numerator and denominator.

Ken also mentioned the difficulties with surveys of population health that rely on self-assessed health status. For example, self-reported body mass index (BMI) is often understated – this can provide problems for analyses of health risk factors.

Borek Puza

NEW SOUTH WALES

The Annual General Meeting of the NSW Branch was held on 30 March. The outgoing President, John Rayner announced the incoming council for 2004:

President : Alun Pope
Immediate Past President: John Rayner
Continuing Councilors: Caro Badcock, Jos Beunen, Ian Nivison-Smith, Fred Osman, Shelton Peiris, Neville Weber

New Councilors: Frankie Chan, Chris Howden, Scott Sisson.

The President then invited Alun Pope to deliver the 2004 H.O. Lancaster Lecture, entitled *Statistical Significance.* Alun started from the observation that there is a huge demand for what statisticians can provide, yet statisticians are often not the people called upon first to meet this demand. One reason was that, while we are often regarded as necessary contributors to some activities, we are not regarded as *significant* players, rather like the scorer in a cricket match. He found hope for the future in the diversity of statistics and its dynamic nature and discussed some steps we can take as a society, and as individuals, to change ourselves and the perceptions others have of us. He illustrated this with some examples from his experience as a consultant.

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The SSAI President, Neville Bartlett, spoke to the NSW Branch in February, at a meeting specially arranged to discuss the question of whether the *ANZJS* should become an electronic-only journal. Neville explained the advantages of this line of approach and also the disadvantages. Members were very appreciative of Neville's willingness to speak to the Branch and there was a lively discussion after his presentation. It was clear that many of those present were not favourably disposed to the idea of electronic *only*, although they could see the advantages of having electronic as well. It was also clear that quite a few were unaware that electronic access was already available to members. Neville assured us that the Society would not rush into this without the support of the members.

Australasian Conferences

International Symposium on Forecasting
July 2004 — Sydney, Info at: http://isf2004.org and click on "Conference details".

Econometrics Society Australasian Meetings
7 – 9 July 2004 — Melbourne, Info at: http://www.monash.edu.au/oce/ESAM04/

IBC2004 Satellite Workshop on Epidemiological Methods and Clinical Trials for Preventative Heatlh
7 – 9 July 2004 — Sydney, Info at: http://cmis.csiro.au/IBC2004SatelliteWorkshop/

Australian Statistical Conference
11 – 16 July 2004 — Cairns, Queensland
Contact: Neville Bartlett, neville@nrbartlett.com.au

International Biometric Conference
11 – 16 July 2004 — Cairns, Queensland
Contact: Kaye Basford, k.e.basford@mailbox.uq.edu.au

Thredbo Statistical Meeting
6 – 11 February 2005 — Thredbo Village, NSW. Australasian Region of the International Biometric Society and Australasian GenStat Users Association Inc.
http://www.maths.anu.edu.au/thredbo2005/

Fourth International Conference on Statistics in Business and Industry (ISBIS-4)
13 – 16 April 2005. ISBIS-4 is a satellite meeting to the ISI Session in Sydney. It will focus on important statistical issues relating to productivity improvement, improved use of quantitative methods to support decision-making at all levels of business and industry, and statistical aspects of Finance.
More information: visit http://www.action-m.com/isbis4 or contact the conference Director, Nick Fisher, at nf@valuemetrics.com.au , phone +61 407 017 016.

Overseas Conferences

TIES 2004 – The International Environmentics Society and ACCURACY 2004: 6th International Symposium on Spatial Accuracy Assessment.
28 June – 1 July 2004, Portland, Maine, USA.
Info at: http://www.ncrs2.fs.fed.us/4801/meetings/ties/default.asp

The 6th ICSA International Conference
July 21 – 23 2004 — National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore
More information can be obtained from the NUS-ICSA 2004 website at:
http://www.stat.nus.edu.sg/ICSA.htm

International Sri Lankan Statistical Conference: "Visions of Futuristic Statistical Methodologies"
28 – 30 December 2004 — Kandy, Sri Lanka
Conference website: http://www.st.rmit.edu.au/~desilva/conference/slstat.htm

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Testing the Modality of Regression Functions

Dr. David Hirst of BiometricsSA, a co-operative group of the Faculty of Sciences of The University of Adelaide, and the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) of Primary Industries and Resources South Australia, addressed the February Branch meeting.

The bandwidth test was originally used to determine whether a density function was multimodal, but recently it has been applied in various contexts to similar problems for regression functions. For example, to test the null hypothesis that a regression function is unimodal, the bandwidth test finds the smallest bandwidth where a kernel estimator of the regression function has one mode, and rejects the null hypothesis if this is too large. However, the bandwidth test is generally known to be conservative, in that the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis is too low. The size of the test can be low when M is strongly monotonic. These tests may include spurious modes due to the difficulty of flat functions. The issue of sample variation might also cause very small modes to be missed. The boundary bias of some estimates can cause extra modes.

Some of these problems can be fixed by using the asymptotic properties of the bandwidth to calibrate the test. Methods to reduce conservatism of the test include: size (H_0 : true) should be near the specified significance level, (ii) power (H_0 : false) should be as large possible. However, the test is still conservative for linear functions.

More complex cases still need to be investigated especially testing for multi-modality and errors that do not have constant variance.

Margaret Swincer

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

What Is This and What Does It Think of the SSAI WA?

Adult Sandgroper (Order Orthoprtera, Family Cylindrachetidae, Genus Cylindracheta). (Photograph: The University of Western Australia Zoology Department.)

To the untrained eye, the odd-looking creature in the photo below could be an alien lifeform. Close, it is the adult form of a *larviform* insect known as a sandgroper, which spends all its life underground tunnelling through sand. People from Western Australia are sometimes called "sandgropers" because they live on the sandy soil on the Swan Coastal Plain.

That's the end of the biology lesson and the real start of this article. In the course of conducting Branch Committee business and making decisions on behalf of the membership that nominated and elected us, we have often wondered whether our decisions were truly in line with the desires of our members. The WA Branch Committee therefore thought it would be an excellent idea to find out what sandgroper members thought of the SSAI WA, so a survey was designed and conducted. The focus of the survey was on member's perceptions and satisfaction with activities undertaken by the WA Branch Committee. Questions on some broader activities such as the Sections were also included.

The survey was posted out to our 88 members in September 2003, and we received 40 completed questionnaires back by the start of November. This equates to a response rate of 45%, which is quite good for a mailout-mailback self-completion methodology.

The employment sectors of the responding members were roughly split among private industry, academia and state government. In consideration of the definitional differences between the survey and the member database, we observed a slightly higher proportion of members employed from the private sector and slightly lower proportion of members in academia. While not statistically significant, it was worth bearing in mind for some of the results.

Branch Meetings

The WA Branch enjoys a good turnout to our branch meetings, one of our major activities, which was reflected in the survey results. The majority of the responding members have attended at least one meeting so far this year, and nearly 50% have been to more than half of the meetings. The opportunity to mix and mingle with other statisticians was the most attractive aspect of the meetings (70% noting this response), closely followed by the range of speakers and topics (62%) and the social side of the meetings (47%). A third saw the meetings as an opportunity for professional development. The most common factor mentioned by respondents that might encourage them to attend more meetings was more applicable seminar topics (36%).

A few alternatives to the monthly meeting format were suggested to see if there was something else we could be doing. A seminar or workshop co-hosted with another professional society and a branch meeting held some place other than the usual setting were both attractive to half of the responding members, and a further third had no real feeling on the subject. The Branch has noted these results and will consider them in planning future seminars and meetings.

In general, the responding members find the location of the branch meetings to be suitable (72%), and like the format of the meetings (67%). Again, the social side of the branch meetings came through with most respondents saying they are a good opportunity to catch up with colleagues (67%) and that they enjoy the informal part (65%). (For the non-sandgropers, we partake in wine and cheese before the presentation begins.) The survey also confirmed that we were about on track with what our members wanted in a Christmas function, and the planning for this year's function took the preliminary survey results into consideration.

The Committee

The Committee's performance was also up for evaluation. The responding members who gave a rating generally gave us a pat on the back – none

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thought we weren't doing a good job and 72% thought we were. Similarly, 82% of responding members thought the Committee were approachable. We didn't score as well on listening to our members' concerns – 41% thought we did this and 54% were neutral on the subject. (Perhaps there are no concerns!) We could also improve on keeping our members informed about Central Council issues (47% agreed we did this okay).

Sections

Membership of or interest in the specialist Sections of SSAI was varied amongst WA members. The most popular among the respondents was Statistics in the Biological Science and Statistical Computing (42% of members respectively), closely followed by Statistics in the Medical Sciences (37%). Around a third listed Young Statisticians as one of their special interest sections. Nearly two-thirds had attended or participated in a workshop, conference session or seminar organised by Sections. There was strong support for the continuation of Sections (67% in agreement), and a third saw their membership of a Section as giving them a disciplinary home within the SSAI. The majority agreed that organising specialist workshops, seminars and conference sessions is an essential activity of Sections (75%).

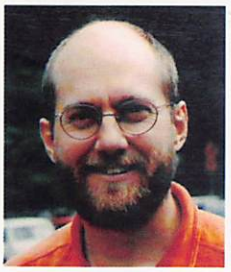
Young Statisticians

The WA Workshop for Young Statisticians is a popular and highly successful event held every two years in Perth (most recently in February 2003). Half of the respondents had attended the workshop, and two-thirds had attended some sort of Young Statisticians focussed event during the year. There was consensus that the Young Statisticians section makes it easier and less intimidating for young statisticians to join the SSAI, and that the Group provides an essential link between new and established statisticians. A resounding 88% of respondents agree that organising workshops, seminars and events for young statisticians is an essential activity of the WA Branch.

Membership Fees

We asked the WA members to compare the WA membership fee with the fees of other professional societies. Not surprisingly, 79% thought they were reasonable in comparison. Around two-thirds thought the WA fee represented value for money.

VICTORIA



Professor Rob Hyndman

The parade of new Victorian professors of statistics continues. In November 2003 Rob Hyndman was promoted to a personal Chair in the Department of Econometrics and Business Statistics at Monash University. A polished speaker who never commits the sins of being boring or abstruse (or, indeed, any sins at all), Rob is highly sought after as a presenter of seminars and workshops. His reputation as a researcher in his chosen field of time series analysis is similarly distinguished. Throughout his career Rob has made substantial contributions to the Statistical Society. He has been Victorian Branch Secretary (1993-1994), Book Review Editor of the Society's journal (1996-2002) and is currently Theory and Methods co-editor of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Statistics. At the end of the year he will be standing down from this position, and will assume the role of Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Forecasting. Rob's career has been a realisation of a highly non-stationary time series, with positions at Melbourne and Monash Universities, and rapid promotion to his current level. As to what the future holds, we need only consult an expert in forecasting – Rob himself.

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The Victorian Young Statisticians Group continues to hum along. The final activity last year was a sparkling Christmas party, and provided a fitting finale to a successful comeback year. The first event for 2004 has already taken place. Those interested should contact Te-Chieh Hung (tdhung@ ms.unimelb.edu.au) for further information.

With the large number of new Victorian Professors of Statistics, the President, Kay Lipson, has instituted a Professorial Series of presentations at the monthly meetings. Phil Brown (March 2003), David Fox (May 2003) and Chris Lloyd (March 2004) have already performed. Phil, on a 12 month toe-dipping placement with the CSIRO, has decided to return to the University of Kent, but luckily he was the first cab off the rank. Watch this space for accounts of future episodes.

Geoff Laslett

Young statisticians Te-Chieh Hung, Natalie Karavarsamis and Martin Donadio. Photo: Brian Phillips

In summary, the member survey has served its purpose in informing the 2003 and future SSAI WA Committee Committees about the thoughts and perceptions of the membership. The results have already been used to assist in planning the Christmas Function, and no doubt we will refer to the survey when other decisions are to be made on behalf of our members. I would like to thank CSIRO and Data Analysis Australia for their support in circulating and analysing the surveys, and the WA Committee for their guidance and encouragement to give this a go. And a big thanks to the WA members who filled in the survey!

NB The survey questions will be available on the WA Branch web pages soon.

Jodie Thompson