Standard Operating Procedures in epidemiological and public health studies

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are used to apply methods and procedures in a standardized way. They help researchers with less experience for a proper conduct of the methods and procedures and serve as reminders by the more experienced groups.

The uses of SOPs are widespread within clinical studies and laboratories. However, the use of SOPs is not yet common in large epidemiological studies. With the increasing number of multi-centre and multi-country studies, the development and use of SOPs for agreed dietary assessment procedures will be an advantage to improve comparability of study data.

As part of the Innovative Dietary Assessment Methods in Epidemiological Studies and Public Health project (IDAMES) two preliminary SOPs for innovative methods in epidemiological studies were generated and tested in five European countries in the IDAMES pilot study. After minor revision, two ‘final’ SOPs that allow quantitative and detailed characterisation of individuals regarding their dietary intake, and generated in a manner that allows other groups to use them in epidemiological and public health studies, were developed. The word final is in quotation marks since SOPs are living dynamic documents, and therefore cannot be regarded as definitive or final as such. One of the SOPs applies to studies using food frequency (FFQ) or food propensity questionnaires (FPQ), the other SOP applies to telephone administered 24-hour dietary recalls (24-HDR). Both SOPs can be accessed online at www.idames.eu.

SOP for Food Frequency/Food Propensity Questionnaires and survey information material

This SOP applies to studies using FFQ or FPQ, preferably the common European Food Propensity Questionnaire, EFPQ (https://nugo.dife.de/efbo/efpq/page/en).

The Questionnaires can be either web based or paper based, or the participants can be given an option of choosing between the two versions.
Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the assessment of dietary composition in epidemiological studies

SOP for 24-hour dietary recall telephone interviews

This SOP applies to the common procedures on how to contact the participants regarding 24-hour dietary recall telephone interviews, how to perform the interviews, how to deal with common contact problems like no answer, answering machines, the participant is not available or do not have time for an interview, etc., and finally to the record storage and backup procedures.

Use of SOPs in epidemiological studies and public health

SOPs can be used in all steps of a study; when planning the study, for data collection, the analysis, administrative purposes, etc. The SOP must be read, understood and used by all staff and personnel for an appropriate period of time. Thereafter, a documented periodic review and updating will ensure that the SOPs remain living and useful documents.