Mental retardation (MR) is a definition which comprises a series of conditions whose common feature is an intellectual handicap that develops before the age of 18, afflicting 2-3% of the world’s population. The classification of MR into different categories is determined by the extent of the handicap instead of its cause, which often remains unrecognized. Sometimes, MR runs in a family, characterizing familial MR, and those cases permit an in-depth look into the genetic causes and consequences of the problem. However, almost no work is available on the prevalence of familial MR among the registered MR cases, possibly because familial MR is a term with no clear definition. The scope of this work is to review the topic and discuss the implications of different genetic and environmental factors, which characterize particular categories of familial cases, suggesting a practical classification of familial MR, which is important for epidemiologic studies and also for counseling in the clinic. Some of the aspects are discussed under the perspective of a newly-developed country like Brazil.

Keywords
Mental retardation, Public Health, Genetics, Epidemiology.