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THE NEED FOR AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DECISION-MAKING IN GENERAL PRACTICE

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The core of general practice is the relationship between the doctor and patient. One of the central aspects of this relationship is the process of decision-making, which can range from the simple clinical types of decision to decisions at a practice level about how services should be organised. The decisions ought to involve a negotiated arrangement which takes account of factors such as patient need, preferences, priorities, available resources and evidence of the effects of providing different forms of care. Both the doctor and patient require access to reliable and valid information about each of these factors, which they can then consider applying to the situation where a decision is required. Evidence based ***(EB)*** medicine is the phrase used to describe such an approach and entails (from the doctor’s perspective) “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients”. EB health care ***(HC)*** has never been promoted as a total substitute for clinical experience. It approaches build on and support, rather than directly challenge, the traditional values of HC practice. In particular, there have been a number of developments during the past few decades which make it much easier to adopt an EB approach to HC decision-making. These include the availability of better research methods for assessing the validity of evidence of effectiveness through to improved techniques for collating evidence in a systematic way. If an EB practice is embraced it will improve general practice in a number of different ways. Firstly, it will make general practice an even more rewarding discipline within which to practice. Secondly, it will support shared decision-making with users, which is increasingly advocated as the ideal model of making decisions within the medical encounter. Finally, EBP will help maintain the central role of general practice in HC. In an environment with an increasing focus on both the accountability of health expenditure and identification and measurement of health outcomes for all health interventions, it would be perilous to ignore EBP in general practice.