

## Evidence-based dentistry: Is it worth changing our approach to practice?

Today's health science literature is filled with discussions about "evidence-based practice." This month's Current Concepts section takes a more detailed look at the topic in general and how it applies to our dental practices in particular.

There are two major factors pushing the need for evidence-based science: (1) the escalating avalanche of new knowledge and (2) the increasing public expectation and demand for successful outcomes from the services we render.

Materials, instruments, techniques, and therapies change so fast that most of us have difficulty keeping up with their names, much less the details of their use. To complicate matters, most of them are more technique sensitive than what they replace. Misuse is more likely to result in an unfavorable outcome, an unhappy patient, and higher stress levels among doctors.

As electronic technology expands, information retrieval is increasingly easy. The Internet, CD-ROM, and now DVD have grown rapidly, and traditional publishers are devising plans that use the new media. Meanwhile, the pressure mounts on the individual practitioner to assess the reliability and validity of what is presented, regardless of the delivery format. Ease of entry into the electronic world through desktop publishing and recordable CDs allows anyone with basic computer skills to publish whatever they wish—with or without peer review.

So what are we to believe as we sift through the data-rich world of the millennium? How can we have confidence that what we read, see, and hear is valid and will improve our chances of satisfactory patient outcomes?

Patient expectation is at an all-time high, around the world. Patients have access to the same data that doctors do in many cases, and as their knowledge levels increase, so do their expectations and demands. While it is generally a good thing to have educated patients, attending doctors have the responsibility of being informed and able to

deliver learned commentary on things patients hear and read. Part of the requirement of contemporary practice is the assumption of responsibility to provide reliable oral health science to the communities in which we practice. This is yet another reason to be both current and correct!

There are two immediate strategies for the successful management of increased knowledge and patient demands.

1. Peer-reviewed journals such as *Quintessence International* take the responsibility of publishing valid and reliable data seriously, so the reputation of traditional publishers counts for a lot in assessing the literature. As for electronic sources, as with all other sources, it is a case of "reader beware." The Current Concepts section this month helps by offering tools for use in your own critical-thinking activities.
2. The second strategy is open and regular communication with patients and the communities in which we practice. Unrealistic patient expectations, as well as exposure to extreme information of all sorts, is more easily dealt with when a prior relationship of mutual trust has been established.

Evidence-based dentistry—not only is it worth changing our approach to practice, it is essential to the successful practice of the millennium.

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