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Towards evidence-based medicine for paediatricians

Edited by Bob Phillips

Sharing decision-making

Archimedes questions begin with a scenario. This is because the patient, their situation and the question they provoke, is the hub around which the wheel of evidence-based practice revolves. It's the patient's situation that triggers the asking of a structured clinical question,¹ and the selection of patient-oriented outcomes which are important to the particular patient; this means listening carefully to what this particular family and patient are telling you. The acquisition and appraisal of studies that follow fundamentally link to this, and the end result should be bringing those thoughts back to the patient and discussing what this means for them.

That discussion of what the evidence is and how to act on it is the core of shared decision-making.

My experience of shared decision-making has evolved over my years of working in paediatric oncology. Most often, I've had conversations which are most shared and least guided when we're talking about symptom-relieving approaches where a variety of near-equally effective options are open. (Next most often it's in the situation of relapsing disease where a wide range of uncertainty in many dimensions appears.) For a massive range of not-yet-senior clinicians, the realms of non-life-saving interventions are where I would suggest you take a brave step into the world of shared decision-making.

Yes, really.

What this will mean is to reject evidence based medicine as a satisfying, brain stretching but ultimately pointless intellectual exercise. It means to view listening to your patient and their relatives, to understand and to incorporate their views into your conception of the medical actions that could be undertaken, as a fundamental way of practising medicine. It might be tricky to imagine yourself doing this in some straight-jacketed specialities, but you really can make a difference. Why not take it up with the next young person you meet who doesn't like their laxative, or family considering ways to maintain the loveliness of their new baby's soft and uncannulated skin?

Bob Phillips

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