

Practicing evidence-based medicine: The Holy Grail?



On page 380 of this issue of *THE JOURNAL OF FAMILY PRACTICE*, Dr. William Cayley highlights one of the major challenges of evidence-based medicine: translating evidence for patients in a way that is not unduly influenced by our own values,

biases, and expectations. We face this challenge every day.

Recently I saw a patient with uncomplicated low back pain who wanted me to prescribe a muscle relaxant. Another person, after experiencing a first episode of major depressive disorder, requested lifelong antidepressant therapy. An older woman wanted advice about treatment for shingles.

The difficulty I encountered lay neither with the availability of authoritative, explicit evidence-based summaries on these topics, nor with my knowledge of the evidence in these areas. The dilemma was that most studies, I suspect, were of patients unlike the 3 individuals in my care, and that I had little more than anecdotal information about the potential harms the interventions might cause these patients. Moreover, in such instances, how much should patients' preferences count?

Should I divulge that trials of muscle relaxants are equivocal at best, and share my belief that muscle relaxants do little more than make a person sleepy?¹ How should I frame the current

recommendation that maintenance therapy for depression be considered after the second or third episode of major depressive disorder?² And, for the woman with herpes zoster, what to make of the tradeoffs of various therapies versus watchful waiting?³

All this information to convey to my patients, and I was running late for a meeting with the Dean. If you are like me, many days the practice of evidence-based medicine feels like the *holy* grail.

No, I haven't become disillusioned with evidence-based medicine—just comfortable that there will always be a need for family physicians to translate the best evidence to our patients, as biased and value-laden as our recommendations may be.

What are your observations about actually practicing evidence-based medicine? Drop me an e-mail at jfp@fammed.uc.edu, and I will share the results in an upcoming issue.

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