



WHAT IS EVIDENCE?

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Patients need assurances that their health care provider has made their treatment decisions based on the best available evidence (knowledge). This assumes of course, that there is available knowledge about the management of their condition, that this knowledge has been documented (published), and that it is widely accessible by those who need to know (clinicians and patients).

Anecdotal evidence: Medical knowledge has been documented for centuries. Early documentation consisted of treatises, or textbooks, written by esteemed individuals, espousing specific expert views or synthesising current knowledge about a specific issue. A well-known household reference in the late 1800s and early 1900s was Dr. R.V. Pierce's almanac *The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser in Plain English: Or, Medicine Simplified*, self-published first in 1875 in Buffalo, New York. Early evidence for effective treatments (interventions) came from testimonials, which were statements of support extolling the virtue of some product. Dr Pierce's almanac was littered with such endorsements, usually from individuals with trust-worthy-looking photographs and convincing personal experiences (testimonials). Nowadays, celebrities with whom some of the population may identify with, provide testimonials. Testimonials appeal to emotions rather than to logic. Testimonials, or anecdotal evidence, provide in general, weak justifications (personal experience) for taking some action. Even if those providing testimonials genuinely advocate a product or a service, their statements may mislead because of perceived or real, personal bias or derived gains. This is the way researchers today look at 'anecdotal or opinion-based evidence', which may be useful, however it may not tell the complete story. So when a clinician tells a patient that '*this treatment will work for you because it worked well for someone else who had this problem*', what the clinician is not telling the patient is about the patients for whom the treatment may not have been so useful.