



How do we know

WHICH TYPES OF HEALTH CARE WORK BEST?

Issue 10

This document is part of a series of information resources to help you get good quality health care.

What is care that “works best”?

Health care that “works best” is care that gets the best results for your health, is safe, and uses health care resources in the most efficient ways. It’s the type of care you want for yourself and your family.

Medical scientists do research to find out which care works best

To find out what types of care work best, doctors and others do **scientific studies of patient care**. The results from this medical research are called “**medical evidence**.”

Each patient is different, but medical research can show whether some types of health care tend to get better results than others for patients with certain conditions. When there is medical evidence from research that shows which care works best, then using that evidence is part of “good quality” care.

What kinds of questions can medical evidence answer?

Medical evidence from research answers questions such as these:

- **What works best for keeping people healthy?** This includes finding out what works best to prevent health problems and what works best to keep diseases from returning.
- **Which treatments help the most and have the fewest side effects?** Some studies collect evidence on experimental treatments, new drugs, or new approaches to surgery, physical therapy, or radiation therapy. Other studies collect medical evidence on the best ways to improve comfort and the quality of life for people with long-term medical conditions.

Things to consider about medical evidence

Medical evidence tells what we know *right now* about what types of care work best for certain types of patients with certain conditions. There are limitations to the evidence that is currently available and there is always more to learn. For example:

- **Some types of conditions and care have been studied, but others have not.** This means that medical research does not always have an answer about which kind of care works best.
- **Depending on how the research was done, the medical evidence might apply to some patients but not others.** For example, evidence that was collected by studying male patients may not apply to female patients. Evidence that comes from studies of adults may not apply to children’s care.

- **Medical evidence is always being updated.** As researchers do more studies, they learn new things that can cause them to change their conclusions about what works best. This means that medical evidence is always changing and improving.

Using medical evidence to set standards for quality of patient care

When there is enough medical evidence to know what types of care work best, this evidence can be used to set “quality standards” or “guidelines” for good patient care. Care that follows these standards or guidelines is sometimes called “evidence-based care” because it is *based* on the *evidence* that comes from medical research.

- **Quality standards for patient care are created by groups of doctors who are national experts in their field.** To create quality standards, doctors do a careful review of the results from many scientific studies of patient care.
- **Quality standards are created only when doctors feel that there is enough good evidence** from enough carefully designed research studies to say that a particular type of care works best. An example is shown below.

EXAMPLE OF A QUALITY STANDARD:

Getting an antibiotic at the *right time* before surgery

Antibiotics are drugs that help prevent and treat infections.

- Research shows that surgery patients who get antibiotics within one hour before their operation are less likely to get an infection of their surgical wound.
- The timing for when patients are given the antibiotic is important. Research shows that the antibiotic does not work as well if patients get it too far in advance or if they get it after their surgery begins.

Therefore, a quality standard for surgery is to make sure surgery patients get an antibiotic at the *right time*, which means getting the antibiotic within one hour before surgery begins.

Here are some things to know about quality standards:

- **Quality standards have been set for some types of care but not for others.** Sometimes standards are not set because there has not been enough research yet or the results from research have been weak or inconsistent. Sometimes standards are not set because experts disagree about what medical evidence means and how to use it for making decisions about health care.
- **Quality standards can change.** Since quality standards are based on the latest medical research, they can change. When new evidence is available, the standards are updated.

Health professionals can use quality standards as *guidelines* for giving good quality care

Doctors and other health professionals can use quality standards as guidelines to help give you good quality care. When doctors use the quality standards as guidelines, it is sometimes called using “**best practices**” for patient care.

To give patients the best care, doctors use their training, experience, and personal medical judgment. **Each patient is different, and doctors take this into account when they use guidelines for quality care.**

- Guidelines are helpful to doctors because they tell what care has been found to work the best for most patients.
- Guidelines are based on good scientific research, but they cannot cover every situation for every patient. In the end, it is up to you and your doctor to decide what care is best for you.