Clinical judgment and evidence-based medicine

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One can share most of Buchanan’s comments concerning ‘evidence based medicine’. I want just to add some further considerations based upon my own experience.

First, an evidence-based work can be a tantalizing cover for the need to demonstrate at any price a positive result.

Several years ago, a paper by Rochon et al. showed that an article devoted to a comparison between NSAIDS, presented as being randomised double-blind, never showed negative results if one of the co-authors had some ties with pharmaceutical companies. I suggest to use for such papers the term ‘evidence-biased medicine’. More generally, it is well known that therapeutic negative results are quite infrequently reported!

Second, the majority of double-blind reports comparing a drug versus placebo never give some important data: at the end of the trial, did each patient, interrogated blindly, think that he was treated with the supposedly active compound or not? It can happen when a precise, frequent and noticeable side effect, of course not present with placebo, informs the patient that he was receiving an active drug. If so, the trial cannot be considered as blind.

I am aware of such situations in several trials, for example, devoted to anti-osteoarthritis drugs.

It is true that, in some cases, efficacy of a given drug can be established with few patients in open studies. That was the case for lethal infectious conditions, such as tuberculous meningitis or infective endocarditis. But the most spectacular paradigm was, beyond any doubt, the case for cortisone, the efficacy of which has been demonstrated in a single rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patient, 50 years ago. But this is exceptional.

– One has to think of the many poorly designed, non-evidence-based reports, which can be found in the literature.

– One can apply to evidence-based medicine what Churchill used to say about democracy: the worst technique for trials, with the exception of all the others!

REFERENCES