

Preface to the second edition

During the last decade, the concepts of evidence-based practice have stimulated wide-ranging interest amongst health professionals as one of the central foundations underpinning the organisation and provision of health care services. Some people have suggested evidence-based practice represents a new paradigm whilst others argue it is nothing more than a repackaging of old concepts wrapped in new jargon. Irrespective of these divergent views, there is little doubt that the ideas embraced by evidence-based practice are beginning to impact on most health care disciplines, including general practice.

Although there are other books on various aspects of evidence-based practice, many of these have focused on the acquisition of specific skills, such as critical appraisal, or on the wide implications for the health system of systematically using research evidence to influence health policy and practice. However, there has been a paucity of information targeting the relevance of evidence-based approaches specifically to general practice. General practice is, by its very nature, a highly complex discipline that has been characterised by a high proportion of less well-differentiated problems that frequently highlight the interplay between biological, psychological and social factors. Through trying to confront and unravel these factors, we became increasingly aware of the need for a book which specifically addressed the relevance and place of evidence-based practice for primary care practitioners. We have elected to use the term “general practitioner” although we are, of course, aware of the different terminology employed to describe primary care doctors around the world. In addition, we recognise the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to involving the primary care team in activities to promote effective practice.

This book is not intended to be a step by step “how to do it” guide. For general practitioners who are interested in developing a detailed knowledge and skills in this area, a list of further reading and other resources is provided. There are also a growing number of short courses on evidence-based practice which are being offered by academic institutions and professional societies throughout the world. Instead, it informs those general practitioners and primary care teams who wish to gain an *overview* of the topic.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN PRIMARY CARE

The book is organised into two separate parts. The first deals with the approach to utilising an evidence-based approach to the care of individual patients. It begins with how to ask and refine a good clinical question, then track down the necessary evidence and critically appraise it. Subsequent chapters deal with how to apply the evidence, the latter of the two having a specific focus on the application of evidence relating to screening and diagnostic tests. The final chapter in Part 1 deals with how to evaluate the impact of applying the evidence. In the second part of the book, the focus is on the strategies required at professional and disciplinary level in order to develop an ongoing culture of evidence-based practice within primary care. These include clinical practice guidelines, use of computerised decision support systems and continuing medical education strategies.

Contributors have been drawn from six countries. This is reflected in the diversity of writing styles and examples which are used to illustrate the relevance of evidence-based health care to general practice throughout the world. The experience of the contributors is largely in primary medical care in industrialised countries but the underlying concepts discussed are also relevant to primary care in other nations. Some topics, such as the performance of diagnostic and screening tests, are covered more than once in the book at different levels of detail. We have allowed them to remain in the text so that individual chapters are complete in themselves, but have cross referenced where relevant to other chapters.

The success of the first edition prompted us to prepare this second edition. We wish to thank all the contributors for their patience and cooperation in complying with our requests for revisions and rewrites, Drs Trisha Greenhalgh, Paul Glasziou, Linda Geron, Anita Berlin, and Jane Russell who kindly reviewed parts of the manuscript and provided extremely helpful comments and suggestions which greatly improved the end product; Ms C O'Connor and Ms R Burnley who assisted in the final preparation of the manuscripts; and Ms Mary Banks from BMJ Books who provided support and encouragement throughout the preparation of the book. Finally, we also wish to thank our respective families for their tolerance and patience when the time that should have been theirs was spent preparing this book.

Chris Silagy and Andrew Haines