

CAN I TRUST MY DOCTOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS?

BY DR. SUSAN MAPLES



Most of us agree, who we choose to have on our health care team makes a big difference in our longevity and, more importantly, the quality of our life. But how do we choose?

First and foremost, we must be heard and our thoughts respected. When you find yourself in the presence of a medical “expert,” remember that we are each an expert of our own bodies. The best health care decisions require a partnership.

Even if our doc demonstrates extraordinary curiosity and respect for us as individuals, his/her treatment recommendations must be grounded in up-to-date, high-quality, science-based “evidence.”

Why is this important?

Sydney Burwell, dean of Harvard Medical School answered best: “Half of what you are taught in medical school will be wrong. The problem is, we don’t know which half!”

Speaking humbly for myself and my health care colleagues, we must all get better at questioning

our orthodoxies — the thoughts and beliefs behind our routine practices. We must each ask ourselves, “How open-minded (vs. entrenched) am I?”

We as health care professionals can never master the complexities of the human body. Our knowledge voids are deep, and they are vast. We must each cultivate a thirst for knowledge, critical thinking ability and the skills to analyze good scientific literature.

The value of the evidence is another challenge. Any of us can find “evidence” for whatever we believe, but it might be of poor quality. An internet search is a good example. There are so many intellectual biases as well as poorly orchestrated studies.

Richard Horton, editor in chief of the Lancet said it this way: “Much of the scientific literature, perhaps half, may simply be untrue.” Every health professional is aware that if a study is privately funded, and it ends up unfavorable for their corporate profitability, it simply doesn’t get published.

Part of our responsibility as health care professionals is to continually seek out quality evidence and change how we practice as a result of new learning. But it’s a humbling practice. It’s hard to clear out old habits. It’s easier to operate on cruise control.

What’s a patient to do? Don’t put health professionals on a pedestal so high the fall would kill them. Keep asking questions and challenging the status quo. Get a second or third opinion if you feel compelled. Surround yourself with docs who are ask-it-alls and learn-it-alls — NOT know-it-alls. And by all means, keep reading yourself. ■



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- To treat each person with integrity, respect and kindness.
- To help each person take a significant step toward his or her desired oral and systemic health.
- To serve as leaders in our community in the quest towards total-health promotion and the partnership between all health professionals.



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