

Rebuttal: Is evidence-based medicine overrated in family medicine?

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YES. There are many points of agreement between our position and that of Drs Labrecque and Cauchon.¹ We agree that data from scientific research are an important component of medicine and are one of the key distinguishing features of modern medicine. We agree that medicine needs to incorporate patient preferences and values and that clinicians should be expert and humane.

However, we think it is a mistake to equate evidence-based medicine (EBM) with everything good in medicine. Evidence-based medicine cannot simply appropriate all science into medicine. There are many sciences that contribute to modern medicine, but EBM states that only certain forms of research should inform medical practice. It is very important to draw clear lines of demarcation among science, scientific data, and EBM.

Evidence-based medicine fails to deliver on crucial aspects of its mission such as reliable and validated tools for integrating patient values and preferences into clinical care. Rather than being viewed as part of the core of EBM, patient- or person-centred, value-based, and narrative-based approaches have emerged in response to the perceived deficiencies in EBM.²⁻⁴ Some of the decision aids that Drs Labrecque and Cauchon mention are welcome and laudable,¹ but there is much more work to be done.

The issue of the role of the pharmaceutical industry is an important concern that we all share. Yet there is nothing in the tool kit of EBM that addresses problems such as suppressed studies or ghost-writing. We need additional tools to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of research.

Finally, we must disagree that EBM defines excellence in medical practice. Evidence-based medicine has

been largely silent about ethics and other crucial elements of humanism in medicine.⁵ It has been successful in sensitizing practitioners to the threats of bias in measurement. The claim that medicine is an art and a science is often made, but is really not informative. Science and art are remarkably heterogeneous human pursuits. Medicine is a practice informed by science that rests upon a moral imperative to serve the needs of people seeking to restore, maintain, or improve their health. Evidence-based medicine has contributed to this goal, but is by no means the gold standard of care. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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These rebuttals are responses from the authors of the debates in the November issue (*Can Fam Physician* 2013;59:1160-3 [Eng], 1164-7. [Fr]).

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