EVIDENCE-BASED MEDICINE

(3) WHERE TO FIND EVIDENCE

By Claire Jones, DipPresSci, MRPharmS

It is essential that pharmacists keep up to date with the latest evidence base in medicine, but this can be time consuming and pharmacists need to know how best to spend the little time they have. This article follows on from two previous articles about evidence-based medicine and highlights reliable sources of evidence.

FINDING THE EVIDENCE

A vast amount of new evidence emerges daily and in my opinion there are three key questions to ask when planning the most effective use of your time:

1. Which journals should I be reading regularly to keep abreast of major drug trials?
2. Where can I look to find the latest independent review of the evidence?
3. How can I generally keep myself up to date?

The most efficient way to keep up to date and access original papers and reviews is to use the internet. It allows quick access to the evidence base and ensures that you get the latest information. Many websites offer an e-mail alert service that allows you to register your details so that the contents page of the journal can be e-mailed to you. This means that you are regularly prompted to look at whether or not any major drug trials have been published.

If a site is password protected you may only be able to access abstracts, unless you are willing to pay to subscribe. Alternatives would be to contact the postgraduate library at your local teaching hospital or regional medicines information centre (contact details can be found at www.druginfozone.org.uk). The Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s library offers a photocopying service for a fee. Otherwise you could also try university libraries but bear in mind that each library will have its own rules as to whether or not you will be allowed access.

INDEPENDENT REVIEWS OF THE EVIDENCE BASE

Although it is important to be able to appraise critically original papers, it is less time consuming to look at appraisals and summaries that have already been done for you. Listed below are some key sources for pharmacists wishing to access good quality independent reviews regularly. This list is not exhaustive but highlights the best of the sources.

Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin

Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin is published monthly by the Consumers’ Association. It is a well respected and established source of independent drug evaluations (www.which.net/health/dtb/). Recent key reviews include:


MeReC Bulletin, MeReC Briefing and MeReC Extra

Published by the National Prescribing Centre, the MeReC Bulletin is published six times a year, and the MeReC Briefing and MeReC Extra four times a year. Again, MeReC is a well respected and established source of independent evaluation of drugs (www.npc.co.uk/merec.htm). Recent key reviews include:


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1. When and how should patients with diabetes mellitus test blood glucose. MeReC Bulletin 2002(13)
2. Asthma and COPD. MeReC Briefing 2002(18)
3. Heart protection study/Women’s health initiative study. MeReC Extra 2002(6)

Clinical Evidence Clinical Evidence is published by the BMJ Publishing Group and provides an excellent six-monthly updated guide to evidence on the effectiveness of care. It is particularly useful because it provides quick key messages at the beginning of each section.

Clinical Evidence is available free to NHS staff, patients and the public in England through the National Electronic Library for Health (www.nelh.nhs.uk/clinical_evidence.asp). Updated topics for the October 2002 edition include anal fissure, ocular herpes simplex and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

The Cochrane Library The Cochrane Library is published quarterly and consists of a regularly updated collection of evidence-based medicine databases. These include The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews which are evidence-based systematic reviews of RCTs prepared by the international Cochrane Collaboration. Cochrane reviews are considered gold standard.

The Cochrane Library is freely available to NHS staff, patients and the public in England through the National Electronic Library for Health (www.nelh.nhs.uk/cochrane.asp). Recent key reviews include:

Health Technology Assessments Health Technology Assessment is a national programme of research established and funded by the Department of Health. The programme assesses new and existing health care interventions to ensure that high quality research information on the cost, effectiveness and impact of interventions is widely available. HTAs can be found at www.hta.nhsweb.nhs.uk/htapubs.htm and are also considered a gold standard. Recent key reviews include:

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<th>E-mail alert available?</th>
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<td>Annals of Internal Medicine</td>
<td><a href="http://www.annals.org/">www.annals.org/</a></td>
<td>Rea TD et al. Smoking status and risk for recurrent coronary events after myocardial infarction (2002;137;494–500)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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**Continuing Professional Development**

Lowe, J. Estrogen plus progestin increased coronary heart disease and breast cancer events in postmenopausal women (2002;137:41)

Schwartz M. Review: proton pump inhibitors alleviate symptoms of non-ulcer dyspepsia but may not be better than H₂-antagonists (2002;137:54)

Montori VM. A lifestyle intervention or metformin prevented or delayed the onset of type 2 diabetes in persons at risk (2002;137:55)

**Keeping up to date**

The network of regional medicines information centres provides an excellent support for keeping up to date. A previous *Pharmaceutical Journal* article described the tools available on the centres’ websites in more detail. Some websites provide daily news updates and offer e-mail alerts. DrugInfoZone (www.druginfozone.org/) features a monthly Primary Care Journal Watch, which summarises the key trials in the main medical, pharmaceutical and health service journals. West Midlands and Trent Regional Drug Information Centre (www.ukmicentral.nhs.uk/) features drug evaluations such as UKMI stage 4 (appraises newly marketed medicines) and MTRAC Product Recommendations (indicates appropriateness of prescribing products in primary care).

There are many more good quality independent sources of evidence. If you are interested in discovering more, the links on regional drug information websites are an excellent place to start. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss sources of guidelines, but key sites include SIGN (www.sign.ac.uk/) and PRODIGY (www.prodigy.nhs.uk/).

This may all still seem like a huge amount of literature. As a basic minimum, I recommend that pharmacists aim regularly to access the *BMJ* (for original papers), MeReC publications, *Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin* and *Clinical Evidence* (for sources of review), and DrugInfoZone News Update, DrugInfoZone Primary Care Journal Watch and the news pages of the *PJ* (to keep up to date).

**References**