Towards evidence based medicine for paediatricians

Edited by Bob Phillips

In order to give the best care to patients and families, paediatricians need to integrate the highest quality scientific evidence with clinical expertise and the opinions of the family. Archimedes seeks to assist practising clinicians by providing “evidence based” answers to common questions which are not at the forefront of research but are at the core of practice. They are based on an original format from the Journal of Accident and Emergency Medicine.

A word of warning. These best evidence topic summaries (BETs) are not systematic reviews, though they are as exhaustive as a practising clinician can produce. They make no attempt to statistically aggregate the data, nor search the grey, unpublished literature. What Archimedes offers are practical, best evidence based answers to practical, clinical questions.

Each topic follows the same format. A description of the clinical setting is followed by a structured clinical question. These aid in focusing the mind, assisting searching, and gaining answers. A brief report of the search used follows—this has been performed in a hierarchical way, to search for the best quality evidence to answer the question. A table provides a summary of the evidence and key points of the critical appraisal. For further information on critical appraisal, and the measures of effect (such as number needed to treat, NNT) books by Sackett and Moyer may help. A commentary is provided to pull the information together, and for accessibility, a box provides the clinical bottom lines.

Readers wishing to submit their own questions—with best evidence answers—are encouraged to read the Instructions for Authors at http://archdischild.com. Three topics are covered in this issue of the journal.

- Is silver nitrate the best agent for management of umbilical granulomas?
- Does adding ipratropium to salbutamol help children with asthma?
- Should tympanic temperature measurement be trusted?

Concealed, blinded, or masked?

In the anatomy of randomised controlled trials, the words blinding, masking, and concealment are commonly used. They are commonly misunderstood—and this has important consequences.

Blinding (or masking) is the process of obscuring to patient, observer, or both the treatment to which they are allocated. It relies on two therapies having no clearly discernible effects to “unmask” the allocation. Some of these may be thought about prior to the trial (such as the bradycardia of β blockers) but some are more surprising to investigators (during an early trial of HIV therapy, participants in the trial found half the capsules floated, half sank).

Concealment refers to the security of the randomisation list. Before a patient is offered a place on a trial, there should be no way of the investigator knowing which treatment the patient will receive. A trial may be well concealed, although impossible to blind, for example, Hi-Fi trial.

Why bother?

Schulz looked at factors which appeared to affect the results of studies of therapy. Those trials which gave the most exaggerated effects had no allocation concealment. The factor of blinding had a less dramatic effect.

5 http://cebm.jr2.ox.ac.uk/docs/levels.htm
Is silver nitrate the best agent for management of umbilical granulomas?

Scenario
A mother brings her 2 week old baby to your clinic. The child has a small umbilical granuloma but is otherwise well. Should you use silver nitrate to cauterise the granuloma?

Structured clinical question
In a well, 2 week old neonate with an umbilical granuloma [patient], is silver nitrate cauterisation preferable to conservative treatment [intervention] in order to facilitate safe resolution of the granuloma [outcome]?

Search strategy and outcome
Secondary searches—Cochrane, Clinical evidence—none.
1. Silver nitrate.tw
2. Clinical trial limit, 1+2 found: 36 papers, of which none were relevant.
3. Umbilical.tw , 1+3 found: 10 papers, 1 highlighting complications, 1 was a comment on this paper, 1 discussing the use of salt; 7 were irrelevant.

Summary
See table 1.

Commentary
The above papers suggest umbilical granulomas may be self limiting and resolve with conservative management such as the application of salt. They also suggest that application of silver nitrate is not without risk.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that cleaning with Steret alcoholic wipes may be as effective as salt. If they are used, they should be applied at each nappy change. It may also be beneficial to fold the front of the nappy to expose the umbilicus.

No randomised controlled trials have been performed to investigate whether conservative management is as effective as silver nitrate. A randomised controlled trial to investigate this is being planned.

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Does adding ipratropium to salbutamol (albuterol) help children with asthma?

Scenario
A 9 year old girl attended her general practitioner with a moderate to severe exacerbation of asthma. Initial treatment included nebulised salbutamol (albuterol) and oral steroids. She was admitted to hospital, and treated with salbutamol, ipratropium, and oxygen. In the morning, a consultant comments “Ipratropium? I’ve always found that doesn’t work.”

Structured clinical question
In a 9 year old child with moderate to severe exacerbation of asthma [patient], does ipratropium and salbutamol (albuterol) [intervention] compared with salbutamol alone [comparison] improve clinical outcomes (admission rates, relapse, etc) [outcome]?

Search strategy and outcome
Secondary sources—Cochrane review—1 relevant.
In mild and moderate acute asthma, ipratropium has not been shown to significantly improve outcome in terms of hospitalisation rates or length of stay, or clinical care pathway progression rate.

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Clinical bottom line

- In children with severe acute asthma, addition of ipratropium bromide to a multiple dosing regime of beta2 agonists leads to a reduction in hospital admission rates (number needed to treat = 7, to prevent 1 admission), and a reduction in the need for additional doses of inhaled bronchodilator

- In children with mild or moderate acute asthma, no significant benefit of ipratropium bromide has been shown

- Single doses of ipratropium bromide do not significantly affect hospital admission rates, or the need for additional bronchodilators

Should tympanic temperature measurement be trusted?

Scenario

A 5 month old boy attends the emergency department with a history of fever given by his mother. His temperature as taken with a tympanic thermometer is 37.5°C. His mother says he is hot to the touch. He has no focus for his fever on examination. The departmental protocol recommends a full septic screen in this age group if the temperature is above 38°C. You would like to know how accurate temperatures taken by this method are, and whether you should check the temperature using another method.

Structured clinical question

In a 5 month old boy with a fever [patient], how accurate is tympanic thermometry [diagnosis] as a measure of core body temperature [outcome]?
Clinical bottom line

- The diagnosis of fever without a focus should not be made based on tympanic thermometry as it is not an accurate measurement of core temperature.
- Rectal temperature measurement remains the clinical gold standard for diagnosis of fever in infants and children.

Search strategy and outcome

Secondary sources—0.
Systematic reviews—1.
Original research—SumSearch “temperature measurement”, “child”, “fever” AND filter “diagnosis”—57 individual articles, 2 directly relevant.

Summary

See table 3.

Commentary

The systematic review reported 44 studies addressing the use of different methods of temperature measurement including, axillary, sublingual, tympanic, and rectal. Two further studies directly addressed the question of how representative tympanic measurements are of core temperature measurement. Both studies showed a correlation between tympanic and rectal methods of temperature measurement, although it was not strong enough to use as a basis to make decisions regarding clinical management.

Authors

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A problem of information

A general practitioner in Scotland (John S Millar, British Journal of General Practice 2001;51:570) has told a story which will attract widespread sympathy and cries of “Well, you can’t win, can you?”

A man with a chest infection was given a prescription for erythromycin capsules. He pointed out that he had a history of allergy to aspirin and was told that the capsules were safe in that there was no cross-sensitivity between aspirin and erythromycin. Soon after taking the capsules, however, he developed tingling and swelling of his fingers and feet, the same symptoms he had had with aspirin. On reading the patient information leaflet included with the erythromycin capsules the patient’s wife discovered a warning to the effect that the capsules contained the colouring agent E110 which could cause allergic reactions, particularly in people allergic to aspirin. Despite the general practitioner’s attempts at mollification a formal complaint ensued.

The general practitioner points out that it is difficult for doctors to gain access to the information given in the patient information leaflet since standard sources such as the British National Formulary or the Pharmaceutical Data Sheet Compendium do not mention the problem of E110 in the erythromycin capsules and allergy to aspirin. The information provided about excipients in standard professional sources and patient information sheets is often incomplete. For instance, although the data sheet accompanying the erythromycin capsules warned about E110 it did not warn about another excipient, E104, which is known to cause urticaria in some people. There are nearly 200 licensed medicines containing E110 and, to date, the Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Medicines Control Agency have received some 20 reports of suspected adverse reactions to it. Where the information about cross-sensitivity with aspirin comes from is not stated.

It is clearly impossible for doctors to keep up with all this information in printed form; presumably the answer lies with the computer and in making sure that all relevant information is made available.

ARCHIVIST
Acrodynia: a case report of two siblings

Acrodynia, a rare disorder, is a form of chronic mercury poisoning. 1 We report two siblings who developed the classic clinical picture of acrodynia.

A 4 1⁄2 year old boy was admitted with dysuria, general weakness, and loss of appetite. He had hypertension (140/95 mm Hg), and tachycardia (141 beats/min). He was irritable and depressed, and had a diffuse itching papular rash with palmar erythema and superficial desquamation (fig 1). Initial evaluation revealed a normal complete blood count and a normal blood chemistry. Urine analysis and complement levels were normal. Vanillylmandelic acid in a 24 hour urine collection was 22.2 µg/dL. Duplicate scan of the renal arteries, abdominal ultrasound, and computed tomography (CT) of the chest and abdomen, were all normal. Heart echocardiography showed mild hypertrophy of the myocardium. TSH was 5.53 mU/L, and free thyroxine 24.45 pmol/L. A brain CT scan revealed a point calcification at the right caudate nucleus and several bilateral areas of low density in the white matter. EEG was normal. A successive complete blood count revealed haemochromatosis (haemoglobin 165 g/L and haematocrit 48.1%).

After eight days, the patient’s 6 year old brother was admitted with general weakness, pain in his lower extremities, and a diffuse itching papular rash with palmar erythema and superficial desquamation. He was hypertensive (126/87 mm Hg) and tachycardic (140 beats/min).

Due to the fact that both siblings presented, at the same time, with more or less the same complaints and physical findings, it was suspected that their condition may have been the result of an environmental exposure. It was discovered that three months previously, the children had played with a broken sulphomonometer for a few weeks.

Urinary mercury level for patient 1 was 158 µg/g creatinine and for patient 2, 113 µg/g creatinine. Urine mercury level for patient 1, after a dose of captopril (chelating agent), was 214 µg/g creatinine. Chelation was initiated with dimercaptosuccinic acid for a 19 day course. Two weeks later, symptoms had almost resolved and the rash disappeared. A month later, blood pressure and heart rate had returned to normal.

Torres and colleagues 2 published a review of eight cases of acrodynia. In all these cases, and in ours, the physicians first thought of phaeochromocytoma. Mercury inactivates an enzyme that participates in the breakdown of catecholamines, and therefore their concentrations increase, stimulating a phaeochromocytoma like syndrome.

Torres and colleagues 2 also reported that in two of the patients reviewed, haemoconcentration was observed, most probably due to intravascular and extracellular volume depletion. This was also found in our patients.

The brain CT findings of low density in the white matter, in patient 1, were not specific. Neurological examination was normal apart from mental changes that are common in acrodynia. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that abnormalities in brain CT have been described in acrodynia.

In summary, acrodynia, although rare, should be considered in every child presenting with hypertension, tachycardia, mental changes, and cutaneous manifestations. This case emphasises the fact that good history taking is an essential element in even the most puzzling clinical pictures.

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References
therapy to be initiated in the early phase of lung hypertension in order to improve prognosis.

P Casano, M Pons Odena, F J Cambra, J M Martin, A Palomque
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References


BOOK REVIEWS

Management for Child Health Services

Children’s services have increasing priority with the present government in the UK. If we are to use available resources wisely and provide the “seamless service” that children and their parents deserve, then we need good managers to oversee their delivery. Who are these people and where are they found? The editors of this book believe that “all involved in child health are, by definition, involved in managing our present services”—we must avoid their pitfalls and follow their successes. The book was written before the most recent service changes involving the establishment of Primary Care Trusts, and one can only hope that a revised version will contain after “the next 10 years”. Will we, the present day paediatricians, leave a similar legacy for our successors?

R J Jefferson

Sudden infant death syndrome: problems, progress and possibilities

As an internationally recognised disease classification, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is unique in that the diagnosis is reached by exclusion, by failing to demonstrate an adequate cause of death. By definition it is imprecise, the diagnosis of SIDS depends on the thoroughness of the post-mortem examination, the extent of detail given in the clinical history and the meticulous nature with which the death scene investigation is carried out. Even if these conditions are satisfied to some chosen specification, this is not an endpoint but a rather a beginning, as we are still left with the question of “why did these babies die?” The tragedy of SIDS is not a modern phenomenon but was only christened a syndrome 40 years ago and, after extensive research, the possibility of finding a collection of symptoms and signs manifesting as a single cause appears extremely unlikely. Some experts suggest a triple risk causal mechanism for SIDS involving a vulnerable infant, a critical development period and an exogenous event that would not normally put a healthy child at risk. Other experts, frustrated with what they see as a definition of convenience, want to restrict the liberal use of such a diagnosis to exclude suspected cases of accidental suffocation and infanticide. Hypotheses continue to proliferate and, as the evidence for risk factors mount, the debate has widened from causation to the relative safety of accepted infant care practices.

In trying to understand how infants die, we have come to the realisation that we must first understand how infants survive. SIDS research has developed from basic epidemiological and pathological findings at death to a wider investigation of infant sleep structure, care practices, physiology, and genetics. This multidisciplinary approach is elegantly illustrated in Byard and Krouss’ book. The choice of contributing experts gives a clear insight into current thinking and recent advances in different fields, while challenging the reader with a subtle consensus of disagreement. The book gives detailed background of each debate but is more than a reference manual for other researchers in the field. Given the rarity of SIDS, many medical professionals may not have come into contact with the sudden death of a child but will have to deal with mothers concerned about child safety, while some parents are reticent to accept advice unless they know how this has been derived, this book is also for them.

If there appears to be a lack of co-ordination in the approach among different research groups, a slightly over zealous interpretation of findings by some experts and perhaps more emphasis on diagnosis than clarity in the overall picture, then this book has given a true reflection of SIDS research as it currently stands. There is no ending to the story because infants still die suddenly and unexpectedly, but if SIDS research is to be ultimately judged on the number of young lives so far saved then the endeavours of those involved should be highly commended.

P S Blair


Coming back to the new edition of this book is like coming back to an old friend. Like many paediatricians, I have used the first edition as a valuable reference in child protection cases. The expertise and experience of all three authors are well recognised internationally and there is no doubt that this edition will continue to be a valuable aid to all clinicians working with children.

All aspects of abuse are covered and there are helpful summaries in each chapter. It is an easy book to read but also I find it easy to get information on individual issues in child protection. There is an interesting historical introduction: although I would have liked rather more before modern times.

The problem I find with this book is that it is not really evidence based in a modern sense. Papers are quoted with no real attempt to assess their quality. This is partially because there are so few quantitative studies in child protection but I think readers would have liked to have more descriptions on the quality of the methodology of the papers that are quoted. I would have liked the references tabulated in each area of abuse. There are also concerns regarding the section on epidemiology of abuse. The histogram that is used as an illustration does not give incidence rates nor is it population based.

I particularly studied areas in the book that I know cause diagnostic difficulty and where there is controversy. One of these is subdural haemorrhage. I was disappointed that the section was quite short: only four pages. I was also disappointed at the number of references, only 14, in what is the most common cause of serious physical harm in physical child abuse.
I find that neglect and emotional abuse are areas where it is difficult to put facts together for a clear diagnosis. The section on neglect has a helpful list of points to look for in the potentially neglected child and also ways of assessing the whole family. I found the section on emotional abuse less helpful.

Child protection is a very difficult area for clinicians and many shy away from committing themselves to clear diagnoses. This new edition will help give more confidence in dealing with these difficult cases. It is a pity that at nearly £70 it will not be accessible to young doctors outside libraries. Perhaps fewer photographs and being in paperback would make it less expensive and more accessible.

J R Sibert

Mosby’s atlas and text of pediatrics and child health


I enjoyed reviewing this book aimed at students and doctors in training, and I also learned from it. I must add that it is a good source of information for doctors who are preparing for examinations.

The book gives useful information, is highly illustrated and the format with text boxes and lists levels itself for easy reading and reference (revision for examinations).

The photographs are well placed with the text and with excellent explanations, which accompany the photographs, x rays, and scans. The quality of the photographs are superb too, thus the clinical phenotypes, which the authors want to illustrate are clearly visible. I found the book easy to read and understand.

I am sure that this book will prove very useful and will fill the gap in the market, as it will attract those adult learners who learn visually. It lends itself for scan reading for revision.

I teach examination preparation courses and I will bring this book to the attention of candidates sitting the DCH and MRCPCH exams. I would think that the GP tutors who come across this book would find it helpful in their teaching too. Many of the illustrations and slides will enhance anyone’s teaching methods.

More books like this are needed in paediatrics and child health as the pictures and illustrations that the doctors see will enhance their learning (and retention) skills. With problem orientated teaching (and learning) that we now practise, this type of book and presentations would be a most welcome addition. The market is not saturated, and I hope it will never be.

S Lingam

CORRECTION

Unfortunately the authors for the items in the Archimedes articles for September and November 2001 were not correctly coded and do not show up using searches on ADC Online or Medline. The authors for these articles should be cited as follows:

September


November

