

Translated from *Rev Prescrire* July 2013; 33 (357): 481

Managing uncertainty

Robust clinical data are lacking for many health problems encountered in everyday practice. The prevention of recurrent pharyngitis and treatment of uncomplicated acute external otitis are just two examples.

But healthcare decisions have to be made, even when no convincing data are available. Healthcare professionals have some knowledge about the natural course of health problems and have access to data concerning the expected benefits and potential drawbacks of the treatment options available. They must also take into account the level of evidence of the data. They then need to consider how best to manage the problem without causing harm, and to offer patients choices that are more beneficial than harmful. They must also explain all of this to the patient, including any uncertainties.

When patients experience health problems that have been under-researched, they are more likely to encounter conflicting opinions and differences in practice among healthcare professionals. They also run a risk of being offered poorly evaluated, sometimes inappropriate or even dangerous treatments. It is in their own interests to question healthcare professionals about the treatments they are offered and to remain sceptical about procedures that are obviously not well established.

Health authorities have many of the resources and are in a position to develop clin-

ical research programmes and to involve healthcare professionals in this research. It is up to these authorities to encourage research that addresses poorly evaluated health problems, prioritised according to their frequency, severity and the problems they pose. It is up to health authorities to direct research funding where it is most needed. They also have a responsibility to provide access to all of the data generated in clinical trials, to make the results more reliable and more useful.

Health insurance organisations have a responsibility to not waste the contributions paid by the people they insure. They should refrain from paying for and thus encouraging the use of treatments that have not been properly evaluated. They should also contribute to research, by funding studies or by providing access to the data in their possession, for example for pharmacoepidemiological studies.

Managing uncertainty in health care is one of a professional's responsibilities. Reducing this uncertainty, through a strategy based on clinical research that meets patients' needs, requires the mobilisation of all those with a stake in health care. This obviously includes healthcare professionals, but public health agencies also have a role to play. The goal is to bring clarity, particularly to areas of routine care in which knowledge is too limited.

Prescrire