

# Balancing act

In 1990, when Gordon Guyatt was looking to describe a radical new approach to practising medicine, his first choice earned him an all-out attack from his McMaster colleagues.

“I quickly concluded that the term ‘scientific evidence’ was not going to cut it,” confesses the professor of CE&B who was then coordinator of the internal medicine residency program.

His second choice, ‘evidence-based medicine’, stuck and two years later exploded worldwide with an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association announcing it as “a new paradigm for medical practice”.

What started as an exercise conceived by founding CE&B Chair David Sackett to bring critical appraisal to the bedside has since been hailed as one of the 15 greatest medical breakthroughs in modern history. For his pioneering role, Guyatt has been recognized with a succession of honors, including Canada Health Researcher of the Year (2013), Officer of the Order of Canada, and Distinguished University Professor.

The notion that health-care decisions should be based on the best available evidence may seem a self-evident truth but, as Guyatt explains, it’s more complicated than that.

“It’s about assessing the quality of the evidence and applying it to a specific patient, then balancing it with the patient’s values and preferences to come up with a course of action that is right for them.”

This tricky balancing act demanded a new skill set for physicians. An international EBM Working Group was formed, a “user’s guide” was launched, and the esteemed Cochrane Collaboration, with its emphasis

on high-quality systematic reviews, soon followed.

In 2004, EBM got a major boost with the introduction of GRADE, a new approach to the development of clinical practice guidelines. “It brought us to a much more sophisticated understanding of what makes evidence trustworthy

or untrustworthy,” says Guyatt.

Today, McMaster remains the global centre of evidence-based clinical practice with annual workshops that attract clinicians and clinician-educators from around the world.

Ensuring EBM is taken up into practice is always front and centre. “Our focus now is on developing pre-processed information that clinicians can understand quickly and help their patients understand quickly.”

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– Gord Guyatt

